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STAR

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CONTENTS

	Page
Chapter One	7
Chapter Two	20
Chapter Three	33
Chapter Four	45
Chapter Five	58
Chapter Six	70
Chapter Seven	82
Chapter Eight	92
Chapter Nine	107
Chapter Ten	119
Chapter Eleven	133
Conclusion	142

CHAPTER ONE

THE ADVANCING division plunged into the boundless forests, and the forests swallowed it.

Where German tanks, German aircraft and the bandit gangs ranging the district had failed, these vast woodlands with their war-wrecked, thaw-strangled roads succeeded. Food and ammunition trucks bogged down at the distant edges of the forests. Ambulances got stuck in isolated forest hamlets. The artillery regiment ran out of fuel, and its guns were scattered along the banks of nameless streams. With every hour the distance separating them all from the infantry became alarmingly greater. But the infantry nevertheless continued to push ahead all by itself, cutting rations and grudging every cartridge. At last it too began to slow down. Its drive became weaker, less confident, and the

Germans, taking advantage of this, shook themselves free and scuttled westward.

The enemy vanished.

When the infantry is not at grips with the enemy it still continues to do its job, to justify its existence: it holds down the territory won from him. But there is no sight more forlorn than scouts out of contact with the enemy. They tramp along the roadside like lost souls, as though the meaning has gone out of their existence.

Division commander Colonel Serbichenko overtook one such group in his jeep. He climbed slowly out of the car and stood in the middle of the muddy road with his hands on his hips. There was a mocking smile on his face.

At sight of the division commander the scouts came to a halt.

"Well, lost the enemy, eh, my eagles?" he said. "Where's the enemy, what's he doing?"

He recognized Lieutenant Travkin in the man in the lead—Colonel Serbichenko knew all his officers by sight—and shook his head reproachfully.

"You too, Travkin?" he said, and continued acidly: "A lot of fun, this war, isn't it?—drinking milk in the villages and chasing after women. With you around we'll get to Germany this way

and never set eye on the enemy. But wouldn't that be grand?" he asked with unexpected gaiety.

Lieutenant Colonel Galiev, the division chief of staff, sat in the car smiling wearily, surprised at the sudden change in the colonel's mood. A moment before Serbichenko had been raking him over the coals for slackness and he had been taking it in crushed silence.

It was the sight of the patrol that wrought the change in the colonel. He had begun his own army life in 1915 as an infantry scout. In the scouts he had received his baptism of fire and won the St. George Cross. Scouts were his weakness. The sight of their green camouflage coveralls and their sunburned faces never failed to gladden his heart as they noiselessly strode along the roadside in single file, ready at any moment to disappear, to merge with the silent forest, with the folds in the terrain, with the flickering shadows of dusk.

But the division commander's reproof was a serious one. For scouts to lose the enemy, or, in the formal language of the regulations, allow him to *disengage*, was mortifying, almost a disgrace.

The colonel's words betrayed his gnawing anxiety for the fate of his division. He feared an engagement with the enemy because his forces were depleted and the rear services had fallen behind. But at the same time he wanted to get at that

vanished foe at last, to come to grips with him, to learn what he was up to and what he was capable of. Still and all, it was about time to halt for a while to put his men and materiel into good shape. Of course, he would not care to admit even to himself that this wish ran counter to the passionate, driving urge of the whole country, yet he dreamed of a pause in the offensive. Such are the secrets of the profession.

The scouts stood there in silence shifting from foot to foot. They were a pretty sorry sight.

"There they are—your eyes and ears," the division commander remarked scornfully to his chief of staff as he climbed into the car. They drove on.

The scouts stood there for another minute; then the lieutenant slowly moved on and the others followed him.

Travkin, his ear attuned as usual to every rustle, was thinking about his platoon. Like his commander he both desired and feared an engagement with the enemy. Desired it because that was his duty, and also because enforced idleness is disastrous for scouts, clogging them with the dangerous spiderweb of laziness and carelessness. And feared it because out of the eighteen men with whom he had begun the offensive only eleven were left. True, they included Anikanov who was famous throughout the division, the fearless Marchenko, the devil-may-care

Mamochkin and the tested veteran scouts Brazhnikov and Bykov. The remainder were for the most part riflemen sent in from the units during the offensive. So far they very much liked being scouts, filing about in small groups and enjoying a freedom inconceivable in the ordinary infantry unit. They were accorded honour and respect. Naturally, this was flattering, and they looked like fire-eaters—but their mettle was yet to be tested.

Now Travkin realized that it was just this which had made him slow his pace. He was stung by the division commander's reproof; all the more since he knew Serbichenko's weakness for scouts. That foxy look in the colonel's green eyes seemed to have been the old and experienced scout of the previous war, Corporal Serbichenko, challenging him across the years and events that divided them: "Well, young man, let's see how you measure up to an old hand."

Meanwhile the platoon had entered a typical West Ukrainian village with scattered homesteads surrounded by fields and orchards. A crucified Jesus looked down at them from an enormous cross the height of three men. The streets were empty, and only the barking of dogs in the yards and the barely perceptible movements of the hand-woven curtains at the windows showed that the inhabitants, terrorized by bandit gangs, were

cautiously examining the soldiers passing through their village.

Travkin led his group to a lonely cottage on a rise. An old woman opened the door. She drove back a large hound and slowly took in the soldiers with deep-set eyes overhung by thick greyish brows.

"How do you do," said Travkin. "We've come here to rest up for an hour or so."

The scouts followed her into a clean room with a painted floor and numerous icons. They had already noticed that the icons in these parts were different from those in Russia—there were no embossed metal frames and the saints had saccharine faces. As for the old woman herself, she looked exactly like any Ukrainian granny from around Kiev or Chernigov, with innumerable homespun petticoats and bony, gnarled hands; she differed from them only in the unfriendly glint of her piercing eyes.

However, despite her grim, almost hostile silence, she gave the soldiers some fresh bread, some milk that seemed all cream, pickled cucumbers and a whole pot of potatoes. But she gave the food in such a grim, unfriendly manner that it stuck in the men's throats.

"Here's a bandit mamma for you!" growled one of the scouts.

He was half right. Her youngest son had taken up with the bandits in the forests; as for the older one, he had joined the partisans. And while the bandit's mother preserved a hostile silence, the mother of the partisan had hospitably opened her door to the soldiers. After serving them some fried pork and a jug of kvass, the partisan-mother gave place to the bandit-mother; she seated herself in morose silence by the loom which occupied half the room.

Sergeant Anikanov, a calm, broad-faced man with small, shrewd, penetrating eyes, asked her:

"Why so silent, grandma, or have you lost your tongue? Come and sit down and talk to us."

Sergeant Mamochkin—stooped, thin and nervous—put in mockingly:

"There's a ladies' man for you! Ready for a chat even with an old woman!..."

Travkin, deep in his own thoughts, went outside and stood by the porch. The village was dozing. Hobbled horses were cropping on a slope. A deep silence reigned—the silence of a village which has known the swift passage of two warring armies.

"Our lieutenant's worried," said Anikanov when Travkin had gone out. "What was it the colonel said?—A lot of fun, this war, drinking milk in the villages and chasing after women?"

Mamochkin flared up. "What the division commander said is his own business! Why d'ye put *your* oar in? If you don't want the milk don't drink it—there's water over there in that bucket. It's none of your business, it's the lieutenant's. He answers to headquarters. You want to be his nurse? Who d'ye think you are? Just a yokel. If I got hold of you in Kerch I'd have stripped you in five minutes and thrown you to the fishes for dinner."

Anikanov laughed good-naturedly.

"Maybe so. Stripping folks—you're good at that. And fine with dinners, too. That's just what the colonel was saying."

"So what?" countered Mamochkin, stung, as always, by Anikanov's calm. "What's wrong with having dinner? A scout with a good head on him feeds better than a general. Folks are braver and cleverer on good food. Get that?"

Red-cheeked, flaxen-haired Brazhnikov, round-faced, freckled Bykov, seventeen-year-old Yura Golub, tall handsome Feoktistov and the rest listened smiling to Mamochkin's hot southern outburst and Anikanov's calm, measured words. Only Marchenko —broad-shouldered, dark, with gleaming teeth—stood beside the old woman at the loom, watching her small fleshless hands and repeating with the surprise of a townsman:

"Why, it's a real factory!"

In all the disputes between Mamochkin and Anikanov, jesting or angry, on every known subject—whether Kerch herring was better than Irkutsk perch, about the comparative qualities of German and Soviet tommy guns, whether Hitler was mad or just a scoundrel, when the second front would open—Mamochkin was always the aggressor, while Anikanov, his clever little eyes screwed up slyly, would defend his position calmly but bitingly, driving his opponent to fury by his placidity.

Mamochkin, excitable, quarrelsome and neurasthenic, was exasperated by Anikanov's rural staidness and good humour. And mingled with this exasperation was a secret envy. Anikanov had been decorated with an Order, while he had only a medal; the commander treated Anikanov almost as an equal, and him like almost any other man. All this touched Mamochkin to the quick. He consoled himself by imagining that Anikanov enjoyed special trust because he was a member of the Communist Party, but in his heart he too could not help admiring the scout's cool courage. Mamochkin's own daring was to a great extent a pose, needing constant stimulation by his own vanity, and he realized this. Vanity he had more than enough, and he had won a reputation as a good scout. He had taken part in many a splendid exploit, but it was Anikanov who had starred in all of them.

In the intervals between missions, however, Mamochkin would steal the show. Young scouts who had not yet seen action admired him greatly. He swaggered about in baggy trousers and brown boots made of the finest leather. His tunic collar was always unfastened and a lock of black hair hung over his forehead from beneath a Cossack sheepskin cap with a bright-green top. What comparison could there be between him and the massive, broad-shouldered, simple Anikanov!

Each one's life before the war had left its imprint upon his actions and behaviour—the calm confidence of the Siberian collective farmer Anikanov, the resourcefulness and precision of the metalworker Marchenko, the recklessness of the longshoreman Mamochkin. But the past now seemed unutterably distant. Not knowing how much longer the war would last they had thrown themselves into it completely. War had become their daily life and the platoon their only family.

Family! It was a strange family whose members did not taste the fruits of life together for very long. Some would go to hospital, others still farther, to the place from which there is no return. This family had its own short but colourful history, passed on from "generation" to "generation." Some remembered how Anikanov first came to the platoon. A long time passed before he was

allowed on patrol—none of the seniors wanted to take him along. True, the Siberian's tremendous physical strength was a great advantage: if it came to it he could easily scoop up two men in his arms and stun them. But he was so huge and heavy that the scouts were afraid they would never be able to carry him away if he were killed or wounded. In vain did he plead and swear that if he were wounded he'd crawl away himself, and if he were killed, "To hell with it, leave me there, what can Fritz do to me when I'm dead?" And it was only comparatively recently, after Lieutenant Travkin replaced the wounded Lieutenant Skvortsov, that things had changed.

Travkin took Anikanov with him on his first raid. And "that giant" scooped up a big German so neatly that the other scouts stopped in their tracks. He did it swiftly and silently, like a great cat. Even Travkin found it hard to believe that struggling in Anikanov's waterproof cape was a half-choked German—a "tongue," the division's dream for a month past.

Another time Anikanov, out with Sergeant Marchenko, captured a German captain. Marchenko was wounded in the leg, and Anikanov had to carry both him and the German; he gently clasped his comrade and the enemy together, fearing in equal measure to injure either of them.

The exploits of veteran scouts were the main theme of long night talks that stimulated the imagination of the new men and filled them with pride in their exceptional calling. Now, in this period of prolonged inactivity, far from the enemy, the scouts were getting slack.

After putting away a hearty meal Mamochkin leaned back, lit a cigarette and said he wouldn't mind spending the night in the village and laying hands on some vodka.

"Yes, nothing much to hurry for . . ." Marchenko said vaguely. "Can't catch up anyway. Fritz is making a good sprint for it."

At that moment the door opened to admit Travkin.

"Grandma, whose are those?" he asked, pointing to the hobbled horses.

One of them, a big sorrel mare with a white star on her forehead, belonged to the old woman, the others to neighbours. Twenty minutes later these neighbours had been summoned to the old woman's cottage and Travkin, hastily scribbling a receipt, was saying:

"Send one of your lads with us, if you like; he'll bring the horses back."

This suggestion pleased the peasants. Every one of them knew well enough that only the swift advance of the Soviet forces had prevented the Hitlerites from driving off all the stock and burning the village. They raised no objections to Travkin's proposal and immediately chose a young herder to go with the platoon. The sixteen-year-old lad in a sheepskin coat was both proud and afraid of this sudden responsibility. He unhobbled the horses, bridled them, watered them at the well and then announced that they were ready.

A few minutes later twelve riders were galloping westward. Anikanov came alongside Travkin and, nodding toward the boy, said softly:

"Won't you get it in the neck for this requisition, Comrade Lieutenant?"

"Yes, that may happen," Travkin replied after a moment's thought. "But we'll catch up with the Germans."

They exchanged understanding smiles.

As he urged on his horse Travkin studied the silent distances of the ancient forest. A fierce wind blew in his face and the horses seemed to fly like birds. In the west the sunset glowed blood-red and the riders raced forward as though pursuing it.

CHAPTER TWO

DIVISION headquarters camped for the night in a large wood among the restlessly sleeping regiments. No fires were built—German aircraft were humming high overhead incessantly, on the look-out for passing troops. The sappers had arrived in advance and had worked the whole afternoon building an attractive green town with straight streets, neat signposts and trim shelters covered with pine branches. How many such short-lived towns had the sappers of the division built during these war years!

Lieutenant Bugorkov, in command of a sapper company, was waiting to speak to the chief of staff. But Lieutenant Colonel Galiev kept his eyes glued to the map. The green surface with the positions of the division's units entered upon it looked very strange. The usual blue pencil lines showing the enemy positions were absent. And

heaven alone knew where the rear services were. The regiments seemed dangerously isolated in the boundless forests.

The wood where the division had camped for the night was shaped like a question mark. And it seemed to be asking of Lieutenant Colonel Galiev in the Army Commander's mocking voice: "Well, how about it? This isn't the Northwestern Front where you sat on your backsides for half the war and German artillery fired at regular hours! This is mobile warfare!"

Galiev, who had forgotten when he last slept, sat wrapped in a Caucasian cloak. At last he raised his eyes from the map and noticed Bugorkov.

"What is it?"

Lieutenant Bugorkov was taking in with satisfaction the hut his men had built.

"I've come to find out where headquarters is to be tomorrow, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel," he replied. "I'll send a platoon there at dawn."

He very much wanted to have the division stay in this wood, even if just for one more day. Then this pleasant town of branch shelters would have been lived in for at least a little while; and if somebody, anybody, only said a few words of praise to Bugorkov for this marvel of shelter-building before they were abandoned and the spring winds took up occupancy in them. Bugorkov came from

a family of master carpenters and stonemasons of repute, and the pride of a handicraftsman demanded satisfaction.

"Give me your map," said the lieutenant colonel curtly. He marked a small flag on it—at the edge of another wood, some forty kilometres from the present halt. Bugorkov smothered a sigh and turned to the door but at that moment the waterproof cape curtaining the entrance was pushed aside and Captain Barashkin, in charge of reconnaissance, entered. Lieutenant Colonel Galiev gave him an acid welcome.

"The division commander is dissatisfied with our reconnaissance. Today we met Lieutenant Travkin and his men. Their appearance was a disgrace. Untidy, unshaven. What are you thinking of?"

The lieutenant colonel was silent for a moment, then suddenly shouted in a desperate voice:

"And will you finally be good enough to inform me, captain—where's the enemy?"

Lieutenant Bugorkov slipped out of the hut and went to prepare a sapper platoon for the coming move. On the way he decided to look up Travkin and tell him what he had heard. "He'd better hurry and get his men shaved and smartened up," thought

the warm-hearted Bugorkov, "otherwise he's going to get it in the neck."

Bugorkov liked Travkin, who came from his parts, the Volga country. Although he was now a famous scout, Travkin was still the same quiet, modest fellow he had been the first time they met. True, they saw each other seldom—each had plenty to keep him busy—but it was pleasant to recall that his friend Volodya Travkin was marching somewhere near—modest, serious, reliable Travkin, always in the shadow of death, nearer to it than anyone else....

Bugorkov could not find Travkin. He peeped into Barashkin's hut, but the latter was still upset by the calling down and answered Bugorkov's question with a volley of curses.

"The devil only knows where he is! Getting me in trouble..."

Captain Barashkin was notorious in the division for his foul language and his laziness. Realizing that headquarters had little use for him and expecting to be removed from his post any day, he had stopped doing anything at all. Throughout the offensive he had had only the vaguest idea where his patrols were and what they were doing. He himself travelled in the headquarters truck and flirted with the newly-arrived radio operator Katya, a fair-haired, dreamy soldier girl with beautiful eyes.

Bugorkov left Barashkin and found himself in the middle of this short-lived human nest he had built. As he strolled along the straight path he thought of how grand it would be if the war ended at last and he could go back home and do his job once more—build houses, breathe the fragrance of planed boards, climb scaffolds and discuss blueprints with bearded master carpenters.

At dawn Bugorkov loaded spades, picks and other tools into a cart and set off at the head of his sappers.

The chirrup of early birds spread through the ancient trees whose tops met over the narrow forest path. Sentries with waterproof capes flung over their greatcoats paced the roadside, chilled from their night watch. In trenches dug around the camp and along the road sleepy machine gunners were on duty. Soldiers lay sleeping on fir branches spread over the ground, huddled close to one another. Some, wakened by the morning chill, were scurrying about gathering cones and branches for campfires.

"That's war," thought Bugorkov, shivering with the cold. "A homeless life for hundreds of thousands of people."

After about ten kilometres the sappers caught sight of three horsemen riding swiftly from the west. Bugorkov became alarmed; he knew there

was not a single Soviet soldier ahead. The riders approached at a gallop, and soon Bugorkov with relief recognized one of them as Travkin.

"Germans not far off, with artillery and self-propelled guns," said Travkin without dismounting.

He traced the German defences on Bugorkov's map—they ran right along the edge of the wood where the next day's town of huts was to have been erected.

"And there are two German armoured cars and a self-propelled gun standing here, probably in ambush.... Look," Travkin added, "Anikanov's been wounded in a scrap with the Germans."

Anikanov was sitting his horse awkwardly with an apologetic smile, as though he had put everybody to great trouble through some carelessness.

Bugorkov was at a loss.

"What should I do now?" he asked.

They agreed that the sappers would wait where they were. Travkin would report to the chief of staff and then give Bugorkov instructions from headquarters. Travkin flicked his big white-starred sorrel and galloped on.

Colonel Serbichenko was standing beside his jeep in the middle of the camp, surrounded by regimental commanders, lieutenant colonels and majors, with adjutants and orderlies at a little distance. Travkin reined in sharply, slid to the ground

and, limping a little after the unaccustomed long ride, made his way to the colonel.

"Comrade Division Commander, the Germans are not far off."

All crowded round him while he reported briefly. The enemy had entrenched along the bank of a nearby stream. He had seen artillery positions and six self-propelled guns. The trenches were occupied by German infantry. Two armoured cars and a self-propelled gun were in ambush twenty kilometres away.

The division commander marked Travkin's information on his map. There was a general stir: regimental commanders and staff officers took out their maps; Lieutenant Colonel Galiev, cold no longer, dropped his cloak to the ground; the head of the political department went off to assemble the political officers.

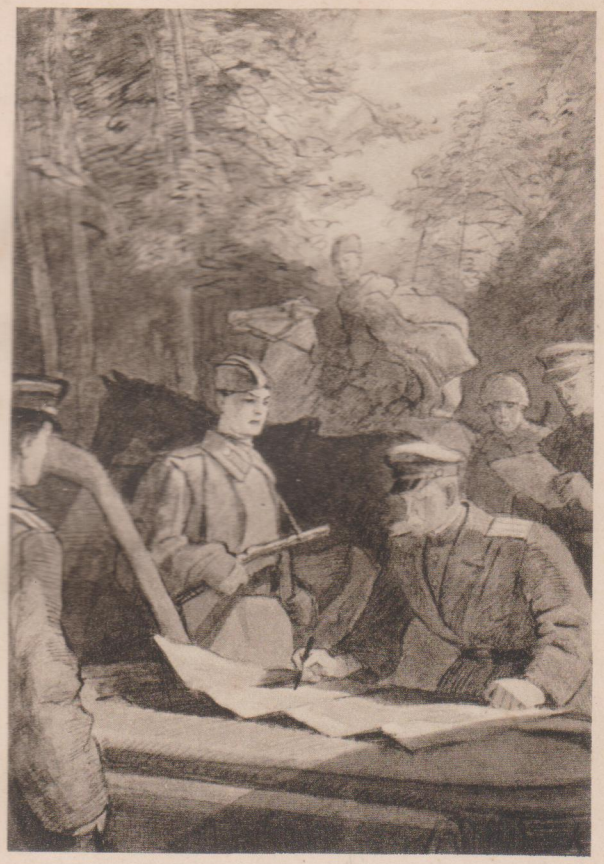
"So you think they're genuine positions?" the division commander asked at last, tracing the last blue pencil lines on the map spread out on the hood of the jeep.

"Yes, Comrade Commander."

"And you saw the self-propelled guns yourself?"

"Yes, Comrade Commander."

"And you're not making anything up?" the colonel concluded unexpectedly, giving Travkin a shrewd glance from narrowed, grey-green eyes.



"No, I am not making anything up."

"Don't be offended," said the division commander in a placatory tone. "I just asked to be sure, because I know, my boy, that scouts like to lay it on."

"I am not laying it on," Travkin said.

Somewhere the command "To arms" was given and there was a stir and bustle in the forest as the men rose.

Looking at his map, the division commander issued his orders.

"The regiments will go in route formation, as before. The leading regiment will send a reinforced battalion forward as vanguard. Regimental artillery will keep with the infantry. Patrols and tommy gunners will cover the flanks. On reaching Height 108.1 the leading regiment will deploy in battle order. Its command post will be on Height 108.1. I shall be at the western fringe of this wood, near the forester's hut. Galiev, prepare operation orders. Report to corps headquarters." All of a sudden he pitched his voice lower: "Be on the lookout, comrades officers! The artillery regiment has fallen behind. Shells and cartridges are short. We are in a disadvantageous position.... We shall all discharge our duty honourably."

The officers swiftly dispersed to attend to their work, leaving only the division commander, Galiev

and Travkin by the car. Serbichenko looked at Travkin and his foam-spattered horse.

"Good work, lad," he said with a smile.

"Anikanov's wounded," the embarrassed Travkin put in for no particular reason.

The colonel made no reply; he issued final instructions to Galiev and then drove off to the regiments.

Staff officers clustered up around Galiev. He was a changed man—lively and vociferous, like the mischievous Baku boy he had been thirty years before. "Galiev smells Hitlerites," the men always said at such times.

"Go and join your men!" he called to Travkin. "Watch the Germans and send runners!"

"Yes, Comrade Lieutenant Colonel!" Travkin called back and leaped on his horse.

In the meantime the other scout had taken Anikanov to the field dressing station. He now rejoined the lieutenant, leading a riderless horse.

Travkin found Bugorkov waiting anxiously where he had left him. He alighted, absently swallowed the vodka the sapper offered and pointed out on the map the location of the division's next headquarters.

"So the war's starting again," said Bugorkov, looking at Travkin's serious eyes.

The scouts spurred their horses and galloped off to meet the unknown.

The sappers also set out, talking quietly about how fighting was beginning again and the end of the fighting wasn't in sight. No end to this fighting, there wasn't.

"Well, boys," said Bugorkov, "instead of a hut-building crew we'll become a dugout-building team."

Travkin soon rejoined his men. They were awaiting him on a wooded rise not far from the nameless stream beyond which the enemy had dug in.

Marchenko, who had been observing the Germans from a treetop, slithered down and reported:

"Those German armoured cars and that self-propelled gun hung around for about half an hour and then crossed the stream—ran back to their unit. I saw that the stream's shallow. The water only came up to the middle of the cars."

The scouts crawled to the stream and took up positions in the bushes. Travkin sent the lad home with the horses.

"Follow this road straight. I'm not giving you all the horses. Two I'll keep one more day. I'll return them tomorrow; otherwise, I'll have nothing to send reports with."

Then Travkin crawled to his men and began examining the German defences. The trench was recently dug, and not yet completed. It barely reached the shoulders of the Germans passing along it. In front of the trench stretched two rows of barbed wire. A narrow, reed-grown stream separated the scouts from the enemy. A man was standing on the breastworks, looking at the east bank through binoculars.

"I'll send that one to Hitler's mother," whispered Mamochkin.

"Don't be a fool," said Travkin.

He weighed the enemy defences. Yes, that barely distinguishable grey strip of earth—that was a second trench. It was a good place the Germans had picked to fortify—the west bank was much higher than the eastern and was heavily wooded. That height over there near the scattered cottages of the hamlet was a commanding height, marked "161.3" on the map. The trenches were well manned. A self-propelled gun stood at the eastern edge of the hamlet.

Travkin suddenly thought of Anikanov, but it was a vague, fleeting thought—the way one recalls a fellow passenger who has stepped off the train and disappeared into the night.

"Look, Comrade Lieutenant," whispered Mamochkin. "Fritz is going for a stroll."

About thirty Germans emerged from the forest and made their way to the stream. Here they spread out and entered the muddy water, looking askance at the opposite bank.

Travkin turned to his best marksman, Marchenko.

"Give 'em a fright."

A prolonged burst of tommy-gun fire raised miniature fountains in the water. The Germans dashed back to their own bank. Looking to all sides anxiously and cackling like geese, they hugged the ground. There was much running about and excitement in the trenches; a guttural command sounded and then bullets started whistling past. The self-propelled gun on the outskirts of the hamlet suddenly shook, roared, and spat out three shells one after the other. A second later German artillery thundered. There were at least ten guns and for three or four minutes they all combined to plaster the mound. The shells tore up the earth angrily, their screaming passage shattering the forest silence.

The thunder of artillery carried to the division's advance column, the reinforced battalion. The men halted. Captain Mushtakov, the battalion commander, and Captain Gurevich, battery commander, froze on their horses.

"Forgotten what this is like," said Mushta-

kov. "Haven't heard that music for more than a month."

The explosions came at regular intervals.

After halting for a moment the battalion moved on. At a turn in the path the soldiers saw a boy in a sheepskin coat leading some horses. He sat hunched over on his horse, his neck drawn in, listening to the crash of the guns.

The battalion commander rode up to him. "What are you doing here?"

"Hurry up," said the lad in a frightened whisper. "There's lots and lots of Germans near the stream and only a dozen scouts. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

WHAT military terminology calls "assuming the defensive" usually comes about this way.

The units deploy and try to break through the enemy's front straight from the march. But the men are weary from the uninterrupted offensive, and artillery and ammunition are low. The attack is beaten off. The infantry remains on the wet ground under the enemy's fire and the spring sleet. The telephone operators hear the furious orders and curses of the senior officers: "Break through! Get the men up and drive the fascists out!" After the second unsuccessful attack comes the order: "Dig in!"

The war turns into a huge excavation job. Digging is done at night, in the light of many-coloured German rockets and the flames of neighbouring villages set afire by German artillery. The earth is riddled with a labyrinth of holes and lairs.

Soon the whole appearance of the place is changed. It is no longer the wooded bank of a stream overgrown with rushes and weeds, but a "forward edge" torn by shells and splinters, divided into zones like Dante's Inferno, bare, seamed with trenches, impersonal, swept by strange winds.

The scouts, listening during the night on what had been a bank of the stream (now it was called no man's land) could hear the blows of German axes and the voices of German sappers also strengthening their forward edge.

But there's no cloud without a silver lining. The rear services began to come up, creaking carts brought shells, cartridges, bread, straw and tinned food. And finally the medical battalion, the field post office, the quartermaster's store and the veterinary hospital arrived and established themselves somewhere near by, camouflaged by the woods.

The artillery regiment also came up and was heartily greeted by all. The guns were dug in, and then they conducted fire for adjustment, pounding the enemy's trenches and dugouts to the great satisfaction of our soldiers.

A relatively quiet life set in—a wet life, a sticky, wretched, mole's life, but life nevertheless.

And when the field post came up and fat packets of letters which had collected during a whole month's advance reached the chilled hands of the soldiers—then it was almost a happy life.

Travkin read his letters in a foxhole among the rushes and weeds on the very edge of the stream. They were from his mother, a schoolteacher in a small Volga town, and from his sister in Moscow. All his mother's letters boiled down to one passionate and piteous unspoken plea—don't get killed. His sister Lena, studying in the violin class at the Moscow Conservatory, wrote about her progress. She referred to Bach and Chaikovsky with cheeky familiarity—"Old Chaikovsky isn't so difficult as I used to think.... That old Bach..." and so on. Youthful chatter, the even glow of electric chandeliers, the soft gleam of violins—how far away it all was! To tell the truth, Travkin even took it a bit to heart that people were going to the theatre, listening to music, falling in love, studying—while he, Travkin, and others were sitting there in danger of death and—what was still worse—in the pouring rain.

"What do they write, Comrade Lieutenant?" asked Marchenko, who sat beside him with a pair of binoculars.

"Jogging along and looking our way—wondering if we'll finish soon," Travkin replied.

Marchenko nodded and smiled without removing his gaze from the German positions.

"The Germans seem to be up to something," he said.

Travkin took the binoculars. Soldiers were trundling a gun out of the forest. He laughed, recalling his sister's words about "that old Bach."

He telephoned Gurevich.

"Look out, Gurevich, they've pulled out a gun for point-blank fire—two fingers to the right of the ruined house. See it?"

"Thanks, Travkin," came the distant voice of the ever alert artilleryman. "We'll send 'em a packet."

Mamochkin thrust his head through the wet rushes.

"Something to eat, Comrade Lieutenant?"

He had brought Travkin half a goose on a plate, wrapped in newspaper.

It suddenly struck him, after sharing the goose with Marchenko, that Mamochkin had been coming up rather frequently of late with various dainties not included in army rations. He was about to ask where it all came from but at that moment Marchenko drew his attention to the Germans and it slipped his mind.

Mamochkin really had become prosperous. Nobody knew where he procured these quantities of

eggs, butter, poultry, pickled cucumbers and sauerkraut.

"You have to know how," he replied with a smirk when the scouts questioned him.

Actually, the matter was simple, and very nasty. When Mamochkin was sent back to the village with the last two horses by Travkin he hired them out "temporarily" to an old widower in a neighbouring hamlet instead of returning them to their owners. He took no money but stipulated that the old man supply him with food. This the latter did generously, for it was the busy time of ploughing and seeding.

The young scouts admired Mamochkin, marvelling at his cleverness and his good luck. The handsome Feoktistov was the most faithful follower; he strove to imitate Mamochkin in everything, even growing a moustache like that of his idol. In the evenings Mamochkin would pass on to the newcomers the oral chronicles of the platoon, laying especial emphasis, of course, on his own exploits. True, he had some condescending words of praise for Anikanov too—who was now history and could no longer dim the fame of Mamochkin.

As they listened to Mamochkin the scouts often caught him up on absurdities and contradictions. This did not embarrass him much, though. On-

ly in Travkin's presence did his eloquence immediately wane. Travkin hated lying. On free evenings he himself sometimes related battle episodes, and such evenings were a real treat to the new men.

His modesty amazed them. He talked about Anikanov, about Sergeant Major Belov, who had been killed in action, and about Marchenko and Mamochkin, but he avoided speaking of himself, making himself out to be something like an eyewitness.

"You must learn to act like Anikanov," he would often say as he ended a story, and Mamochkin would fidget enviously in his corner.

On such evenings young Yura Golub would find himself a place at the lieutenant's feet and gaze at him with adoring eyes. He could marvel endlessly at Mamochkin's exaggerated bravery, but the only model for him was this reticent young lieutenant.

Mamochkin, though, liked those evenings too. The lieutenant, ordinarily uncommunicative, seemed to blossom out on these rare occasions. He knew a host of stories, and sometimes he told about the lives of army leaders and scientists. And Mamochkin had a thirst for knowledge.

He brought Travkin food from his mysterious

source of supply without any thought of currying his favour. Mamochkin was a good judge of men, and he knew he could never hope to gain any privileges from the lieutenant that way. Travkin ate the geese without even noticing exactly what he was putting into his mouth. Mamochkin extended his "patronage" to his officer because he liked him—liked him for just those qualities he himself lacked: Travkin's utter devotion to duty and his absolute unselfishness. With surprise he observed the accuracy with which the lieutenant measured out the vodka ration, always giving less to himself than to the others. And he rested less than anybody else. This, Mamochkin could not understand. He felt that the lieutenant was doing the right thing but he knew very well that if he were in Travkin's place he would act differently.

After bringing the lieutenant the usual portion of "horsemeat," as Mamochkin had dubbed the geese, chickens and other dainties received for the "hire" of the horses, he made his way to the barn the scouts had taken over as quarters. Here he almost ran into Colonel Serbichenko, the division commander, whom he studiously avoided on account of the green Cossack cap and brown boots—the colonel gave short shrift to any deviations from the regulation uniform.

Beside the colonel stood a girl with blonde hair cut like a boy's and wearing the usual army uniform, with junior sergeant's shoulder straps. Mamochkin had never seen her before, he who could list all the women in the division. Serbichenko was smiling affectionately as he talked to her.

Colonel Serbichenko was protectively tender toward women. In his heart of hearts he felt that the front was no place for them but he did not disdain them because of this, as many others did. He regarded them with the compassion of an old soldier who knows the hardships of war.

"Well, like it here?" he asked.

"It's all right—like everywhere else," the girl replied shyly.

"You think so? No, my dear, it's not like everywhere else, here with me. My division's a famous one, a Red Banner division!... Is anybody annoying you?"

"No, Comrade Colonel."

"Well, if anyone does, come straight to me. There aren't many girls around and I don't let anybody bother them.... And what about you? Do you flirt with the boys?"

"What for?" laughed the girl.

"Be careful you don't.... I know everything. You've been seen with Captain Barashkin more than once." His tone suddenly became serious. "See

that you behave yourself. Men are sly creatures, they don't say what they mean."

He said goodbye and went off towards his cottage. The girl remained there under the tree.

The next moment Mamochkin was standing before her.

"My humblest respects, Miss!"

She looked him up and down in surprise.

"Sergeant Mamochkin, scout!" This with a dashing click of the heels.

The girl smiled.

"I haven't seen you before," he said. "Have you come from another unit or dropped from the skies?"

She laughed and explained that she had been transferred from another division.

"Were you friendly with the scouts there?"

"I worked in rear headquarters."

They walked along side by side, the girl laughing while Mamochkin cracked jokes in his best seaport style, wondering how to lead her away from the crowded path.

"Take my advice, Katyusha,"—he already knew her name—"always make friends with the scouts. Who are the ladies' men? The scouts, of course. Who always has vodka and nice things to eat? The scouts again. Who are the independent daredevils? No doubt about it, the scouts! Under-

stand? And don't you really know any of the scouts?" he continued with a playful smirk. "What about our famous Captain Barashkin —eh?"

"How do you know?" she said in surprise.

"The scouts know everything!"

She refused to go for a stroll with him in the forest but promised to pay him a visit sometime. At first Mamochkin was offended by her refusal but he soon regained his spirits, and they parted friends.

Returning to the barn Mamochkin found the quiet but tense bustle which always heralded an operation, and he recalled that today Marchenko was to head a patrol of six men.

Marchenko had only just returned from the forward positions and was sitting in a corner by an old, rusty thresher writing a letter. The men who were to accompany him were putting on their camouflage coveralls and fastening on grenades; they were moving about with a peculiar intensity, and kept glancing at Marchenko—wasn't it time to start?

Marchenko was writing to his wife and his old father in Kharkov. He reported that he was alive and well, and told his wife she was mistaken in thinking he had found a girl here. It wasn't true at all, and he really wrote often but the mail had

been held up because of the offensive. The letter was about commonplace matters, but this time he invested a special meaning in the words, each line implying another, more significant. When he finished writing he was in an agitated state. He gave the letter to the orderly and said quietly:

"Well, boys, let's go. Everything ready?"

He lined up his men, inspected them carefully and asked:

"Aren't the sappers here?"

"What do you mean not here?" came a brisk, matter-of-fact voice from a heap of straw in the far corner. "The sappers are here all right."

Two straw-covered sappers rose; they had been sent by Bugorkov to accompany the patrol.

"I'm the senior," resumed the same voice, belonging to a short, thickset soldier of about twenty.

"What's your name?" asked Marchenko, surveying him with approval.

"Maximenko, Ukrainian like you."

"Where from?" asked Marchenko.

"Kremenchug."

"Yes, round about my way.... You know your assignment?"

"I do," Maximenko replied briskly. "Strip the German mines, snip the German wire, let you through the gap and come back in time for the

Young Communist meeting tomorrow. I'm youth organizer. That's our assignment."

"Good lad," laughed Marchenko. "That brings us together on two counts—I'm youth organizer too. Let's go."

The group set out in single file along the side of the road to the forward positions, where Travkin awaited them.

CHAPTER FOUR

ON THE fifth day after Marchenko's departure, Mamochkin again met Katya and invited her to the scouts' barn, where he had cached a jug of home-distilled vodka.

He spread a white tablecloth in a corner of the barn, laid out appetizing snacks and, inviting Feoktistov and several other friends to join them, seated himself on the straw beside Katya.

The feast was at its height when Travkin, whom nobody had expected, entered the barn.

The lieutenant's arrival caused a slight commotion during which Mamochkin succeeded in concealing the jug and the cup. Truth to tell, Mamochkin did not particularly enjoy having the girl see that he was afraid of his officer, but he would have enjoyed a dressing down from Travkin still less.

The lieutenant threw an inquisitive glance at the group in the corner with some girl he had

never seen. The men had jumped to attention but he quietly said, "At ease," and lay down on his bed in the far corner. He hadn't slept for three days and nights. Marchenko was to have returned two nights ago, but Travkin had waited in vain in the trench, struggling with drowsiness. The strange and alarming thing was that the two sappers had not come back either, although they should have returned immediately after the patrol had passed the mined area. The whole group had melted in the blank darkness and disappeared, and the rain had washed away their tracks.

Travkin lay down on the blanket and fell into an uneasy sleep.

The subdued scouts drank one more round.

"Is that your commander?" Katya asked softly. "How quiet he is ... and young."

Travkin tossed in his sleep and suddenly spoke aloud:

"Why did it take you so long to get back, you queer old duck? And the sappers didn't come either. We've been hearing some Chaikovsky. And all the time you stayed away. Queer duck."

He spoke in a quiet, normal voice, not at all like a man talking in his sleep. It was uncanny. The scouts felt uncomfortable and one by one they dispersed about the barn, leaving Mamochkin alone by the white tablecloth.

Katya stole silently up to Travkin and stopped beside him. His eyes were half-open, like those of a sleeping child; the faded tunic was unbuttoned, and an expression of bitter hurt was printed on his face.

"How handsome he is!" she said softly.

"Don't wake him!" Mamochkin called brusquely. She was not offended, however, sensing in his words the same tenderness for the sleeping man which she herself felt. "Our lieutenant's worried," Mamochkin explained morosely.

Yes, the party was completely spoiled, everybody realized it.

Katya left the barn with a strange, exalted feeling, in a mood of solemn sadness. As she walked through the spring forest it was with surprise and uneasiness that she became aware of her mood. What could have touched her so, filled her with such tender, uplifting sorrow? Again she saw the almost childlike face of the lieutenant. Perhaps she had seen there something of herself, something akin to the pain that had buried itself deep within her, the unhealed pain of a small-town girl who at the front had come face to face with the severity of life at its bitterest.

Katya began to visit the scouts' barn more and more frequently. Mamochkin soon guessed her feeling, and so did the others. Mamochkin was even

pleased. Considering himself the lieutenant's protector in all everyday matters, he decided that a mild flirtation with Katya would distract him from his gloomy thoughts. For the lieutenant had been noticeably dejected since the obvious death of Marchenko and his patrol.

The scouts vied with one another in inviting Katya to the barn. They told her all the news about the lieutenant, even going to the signal company to inform her: "Our lieutenant's come back from the outposts,"—in a word, did everything they could to bring Katya and Travkin together. The only person who noticed nothing of all this scheming was Travkin himself.

On coming into the barn one day he saw that his corner had been curtained off with a waterproof cape, and behind it the blanket spread on straw had been replaced by a real bed; near the bed stood a little table, and on it was a vase of fresh snowdrops.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"What?" Brazhnikov answered innocently. "That's Katya, the radio operator, looking after you, Comrade Lieutenant."

Travkin flushed crimson. "Why do you admit strangers to platoon quarters?"

Brazhnikov looked guilty and said nothing.

When Mamochkin heard about this he threw up his hands.

"What a man! Can't think of anything but the Germans! All the time drawing plans of their defences, sitting over maps and spending whole days at the forward edge. . . ."

As for Katya, at first she was discouraged by Travkin's reserve and his youthful shyness. She was far from accustomed to such an attitude. She was used to being welcomed everywhere, although she knew that the secret of her easy success was not any particular charm of her own but simply the fact that there were plenty of men out here and very few girls.

Then suddenly she felt doubly happy: her beloved was no ordinary man; no, he was proud, stern and pure. And that was how he ought to be. An unaccustomed shyness would overcome her in his presence, a shyness that surprised even herself. Could this be she, who had always considered herself a hardened little sinner? Stolen kisses and embraces in the bustle of campaign life, tokens of a swiftly-passing emotion or simply out of boredom—and she had called that life!

She recalled all that now as something ugly and long past.

Every day she came to the barn with flowers and fluffy branches of willow. But it was not so

much the flowers themselves that mattered—she brought that fragrance of sweet womanliness for which the soldiers' lonely hearts were hungering. And they certainly disapproved of their officer's indifference to the girl, although at the same time they were proud he was so inaccessible.

One day the head of the army reconnaissance, Colonel Semyorkin, visiting the division, entered the barn just as Katya was putting fresh flowers into a blue vase. He had come to see how the scouts were getting on, but he found nobody there except the cook, the orderly and the girl.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Junior Sergeant Simakova, radio operator," she said.

"Oh, I thought you were a flower girl," the choleric colonel growled, and left the barn.

After that he had a long talk with the division commander. They argued politely but they did not mince words.

"You don't know a thing about the enemy in this sector," Colonel Semyorkin accused the division commander. "Can you say you have a clear idea of his forces and his plans?"

Colonel Serbichenko, restraining himself, tried to laugh it off.

"And how should I know? There are times when a division commander doesn't even know

what's going on among his own forces. How can he know what the enemy's doing? I sent scouts out on patrol and they never came back. Nine men mean nothing to you. You deal with an army. But I'm on a smaller scale and to me these nine casualties are a big loss, a very big loss indeed. I've lost a lot of scouts in the fighting."

"That's true. But look what's going on among your scouts," Colonel Semyorkin rejoined. "I went to their barn—nobody there. Even the orderly didn't know where they were. True, there *was* a girl there—arranging flowers. Perfectly idyllic! But your investigating officer only just told me he'd received a serious complaint about your scouts. Yes, Comrade Colonel, you don't know about it, but I do. A complaint from some village or other. There's the reason for the scouts' bad work."

Colonel Serbichenko ordered the investigating officer to be summoned.

Captain Yeskin soon appeared—inconspicuous, quiet, with a slightly pock-marked face and a big, domelike bald head. He gave a detailed account of a complaint from a neighbouring village to the effect that the scouts had requisitioned—arbitrarily! —twelve horses, of which they had returned only ten. Attached to the complaint was a receipt bearing an unintelligible signature.

"What makes you think they were our scouts?"

The investigating officer was not daunted by the division commander's menacing expression.

"This is not yet definitely established," he said.

"Then establish it and report back. You may go."

The investigating officer went out, and the division commander told Colonel Semyorkin wearily:

"Well, we'll send a patrol out into the enemy rear. But you try and give us scout replacements."

When the conference broke up, Colonel Serbichenko left the cottage with the others.

"I'll soon be back," he said to the orderly who had jumped to attention at the door.

He made his way towards a lazily turning windmill, and going up to one of the barns scattered about asked the orderly at the door:

"Scouts?"

"Yes, Comrade Colonel," the man replied and turned to shout into the darkness of the barn: "Ten-shun!"

There was a brief rustling inside. The commander peered about him. Eight scouts were standing at attention in the dim light. One corner was curtained off with a waterproof cape. The colonel walked silently to this corner, raised the cape and saw Katya, also standing at attention. On the small

table stood a blue vase of flowers flanked by books and notebooks.

The commander's angry gaze softened a little. He looked at Katya searchingly.

"What are you doing here?" Then he turned to the sergeant on duty, who had run up to report. "Where's your commander?"

"The lieutenant is at the line."

"Send him to me when he comes back."

He went to the door, then looked round.

"Are you stopping here, Katya, or will you come with me?"

"I'll come with you," said Katya.

They left together.

"What are you so embarrassed about?" asked the colonel. "There's nothing bad in it. Travkin's a good lad and a fine scout."

She made no reply.

"What? Fallen in love? Grand! But how about Captain Barashkin? Dismissed?"

"That was nothing," she said, "nothing that mattered. Just nonsense. . . ."

The colonel grumbled something, then, with a searching look at the girl's lowered lashes, asked:

"And what about him, Travkin? Pleased, I bet? A pretty girl, and flowers in the bargain. . . ."

She said nothing, and he understood.

"You mean he doesn't love you?"

He was touched by the age-old tragedy of unrequited love, embodied in this newly-fledged chick with a junior sergeant's epaulettes. Here, in the very furnace of war, young love was fluttering like a bird before a crocodile's jaws. The colonel smiled.

They met Assistant Army Doctor Ulybysheva and the colonel invited her and Katya for a cup of tea.

In the colonel's cottage the doctor and Katya busied themselves preparing the tea, assisted by the orderly, and when the samovar had boiled they sat down at the table, chatting gaily about everything under the sun.

Soon Travkin appeared.

"Take a seat," the colonel said.

Katya was worried that the colonel might tease her about Travkin, but he never even mentioned the subject. He talked about some horses or other. She glanced shyly at the lieutenant, at his serious young face, and listened to the clear, businesslike replies he made to the colonel, although their sense passed her by.

A wave of inexpressible sadness swept over her.

"What use could he have for me?" she thought. "He's so clever and serious, his sister's a violinist,

and he'll be a scientist. And I? Just an ordinary girl like thousands of others."

Travkin did not have the slightest suspicion of Katya's feelings for him. He was annoyed by her, and puzzled. Her unexpected visits to the barn, her unsolicited care for his comforts—all this struck him as stupid, obtrusive, even indecent. He felt awkward before his scouts; they would exchange meaning glances whenever she came to the barn and would make obvious attempts to leave them alone together.

He was greatly surprised to find her in the division commander's room, and sitting around the samovar at that. And when the colonel began talking about the horses, Travkin's first thought was that Katya had learned about them from the scouts and was making trouble for him.

He explained briefly how the matter had come about. The colonel suddenly recalled those days of the advance, the endless marches, the short, sharp clashes, and that afternoon in March when he had stood on the mud-strangled road sarcastically reprimanding the scouts. And for an instant Corporal Serbichenko, the old scout of World War I, looked approvingly out of Colonel Serbichenko's narrowed grey-green eyes.

"You'll do, Travkin."

Then the colonel asked:

"You actually did return all the horses?"

"I certainly did," replied Travkin.

There was a knock at the door and Captain Barashkin appeared on the threshold.

"What do you want?" asked Serbichenko, displeased.

"Didn't you send for me, Comrade Colonel?"

"I sent for you three hours ago. Has Semyorkin spoken to you?"

"Yes, Comrade Colonel."

"Well?"

"We'll send a patrol into the enemy rear."

"Who'll lead it?"

"Travkin, here," Barashkin replied with concealed malice.

But he had mistaken his man. Travkin never flickered an eyelid. Ulybysheva calmly refilled the glasses, unaware of what it was all about, while Katya had no idea whatsoever that these words were directly connected with the fate of her love.

The only one who caught the expression in the captain's eyes was the division commander, but he had no reason for not agreeing with him. There could be no doubt about it, Travkin was the best person to take charge of this unusually difficult operation.

"Very good," said the commander and dismissed Barashkin.

Travkin did not stay much longer.

"Very well, go along," the colonel said, as he rose. "Make proper preparations, it's a big job."

"Yes, Comrade Colonel," said Travkin. He left the cottage.

The colonel listened to the scout's retreating footsteps and then said cheerlessly:

"A good fellow."

After Travkin's departure Katya became fidgety. She soon said goodbye and left. It was a warm, moonlit night and the forest was wrapped in a deep silence broken only by a distant explosion or the rumble of a solitary motor truck.

Katya was happy. She felt that Travkin had looked at her more fondly than usual; and she thought wistfully that the all-powerful division commander, who was always so kind to her, would certainly be able to convince Travkin that she wasn't such a bad girl after all and that she had qualities worth cherishing. And she wandered through the moon-drenched night seeking her beloved, whispering old, old words, almost the same as in the Song of Songs, although she had never read or heard it.

CHAPTER FIVE

"GREETINGS, Comrade Lieutenant, this is from Ivan Vassilievich Anikanov, your scout, sergeant and leader of the first squad. This is to tell you that I am getting along well and wish you the same from the bottom of my heart. In the hospital they took out the bullet which was in the flesh of the leg. From the hospital I was sent to a reserve regiment. At first it was not so good there because they fed us worse than at the front, and I like plenty to eat, and I am used to the front-line rations. And all day long I had to drill and study regulations all over again from the beginning, and to charge and shout 'Hurrah,' and, of course, there were no Germans and no ammunition for shooting. And another thing. They took away my Walter revolver that I took from the German captain, you remember, the one with the black bandage over his eye. I went to complain to the battalion commander but he said that according to regulations a sergeant does not carry a revolver. And when I said that

I was not an ordinary sergeant but a scout and that I must have handled nearly two hundred revolvers like that, he would not listen. Then I was transferred to an auxiliary farm and here I'm living like a prosperous kolkhoz man. I have everything—sour cream, butter and all kinds of vegetables. Especially as I'm in charge, seeing I used to be a kolkhoz chairman. So we spend all our time ploughing and sowing. And in the evenings I have a good supper and top it off with milk and then lie down on a featherbed. And where I live the woman's husband was killed in the first year of the war and she's always around. And I'm always thinking of you, Comrade Lieutenant, and the other fellows in the platoon, and remembering all our operations, and most of all, how you're having it hard and shedding your blood fighting for our great country, and it makes my heart bleed. And please, Comrade Lieutenant, will you speak to Colonel Serbichenko, perhaps he could send an application and they would let me come back to you. I can't go on here without you all. I feel ashamed at not finishing the war together with you and living here like a prosperous kolkhoz member, as though you're protecting me from the fascists. With greetings to you and the whole glorious platoon,

"Ivan Vassilievich Anikanov."

Travkin smiled, moved by the letter as he reread it for the nth time. He could see Anikanov as if he stood beside him and thought how good it would be to have the scout with him now. It was with something like scorn that he looked at the faces of his sleeping men and mentally compared them with the absent Anikanov.

"No," thought Travkin. "No comparison. They haven't got his calm courage, his coolness and his clear brain. I could always rely on Anikanov. He didn't know the meaning of the word 'panic.' Mamochkin's brave but he hasn't enough common sense and he's selfish. Bykov's got judgment but a bit too much of it. There are times when sober judgment is no better than cowardice. Brazhnikov can't stand on his own feet solidly enough, although he's got his points. Golub, Semyonov and the others—they aren't scouts yet. Marchenko—he was a priceless fellow, but he's evidently been killed, gone from us forever."

Oppressed by these bitter thoughts—which actually did his scouts less than justice, coloured as they were by the mood induced by Anikanov's letter—Travkin went out of the barn into the cold dawn. He made his way to the steep bank which he had chosen for tactical exercises with the scouts.

This place reproduced fairly accurately the terrain at the front line. The bank was cut by a

broad stream overhung by weeping willows already turning green. A shallow trench dug by the scouts for training purposes and two lines of barbed wire represented the enemy's forward positions.

Every night Travkin took his scouts to this "theatre of operations." With his characteristic tenacity he drove them through the icy ford, made them clip wire and test for non-existent mines with long sappers' detectors, then jump across the trench. Yesterday he had thought of a new game. He had stationed several scouts in the trench and made the others crawl up to them as quietly as possible, to accustom the men to move noiselessly. He too had sat in the trench listening to the nocturnal sounds. But his thoughts were not there, they were in the real enemy outposts, now equipped with a strong system of engineering works which he would soon have to get through.

The platoon had got replacements—ten new scouts, so that in addition to his special practice with the group picked for the coming operation he had to train the newcomers. And then he had to keep a daily watch on the enemy in the forward positions, studying his routine and behaviour.

This ceaseless intensive work gradually made him extremely irritable. Previously he had been inclined to close his eyes to the scouts' petty misdemeanours but now he crimed them for the slight-

est fault. The first one to be caught was Mamochkin. Travkin enquired sternly where he was getting all that food. Mamochkin mumbled something about gifts from the peasants but Travkin gave him three days' arrest.

"Let the peasants have a rest from you, if only for three days," he said.

As for Katya, he politely but firmly requested her for the present—that was what he said: for the present—to stop visiting the barn. True, he felt rather awkward when he met her frightened eyes; he almost wanted to take the words back, but refrained.

But what infuriated him most was the unprecedented case of Feoktistov, the tall handsome fellow from around Kazan.

It rained that morning, and Travkin decided to give the scouts a rest. He left the barn and set out for Barashkin's dugout, where he took German lessons from the interpreter Levin. In the bushes by the mill he came across the tall, well-built Feoktistov lying in the grass stripped to the waist under the pouring rain. Travkin asked in surprise what he thought he was doing there. Feoktistov jumped up and said with embarrassment:

"I take cold baths, Comrade Lieutenant. I always did it at home."

But that night when the men were practising

how to crawl noiselessly on their stomachs, Feoktistov coughed loudly. At first Travkin paid no attention, but when Feoktistov broke out coughing a second time he understood. Feoktistov had caught cold deliberately. Naturally he knew from the talk of the older scouts that a man who coughed was never taken on patrol since he might betray the whole group.

Never before in his whole short life had Travkin been seized with such blazing anger. It cost him great effort not to shoot this tall, handsome, cowardly wretch right there in the moonlight before the amazed eyes of the other scouts.

"So that's why you take cold baths, you dirty coward!"

The next day Feoktistov was discharged from the platoon.

When he recalled this incident he still could not rid himself of a feeling of disgust.

The sun rose, it was time to go to the forward positions. Taking two scouts with him, Travkin followed his usual path to the river.

The nearer they drew to the forward positions the heavier and more charged with tension was the atmosphere, as though it belonged not to the Earth but to some strange and incomparably larger planet. Great splashes of machine-gun fire... the deafening blast of mortar shells ... and then a men-

acing silence pregnant with sudden death.... Passing shell-shattered trees, passing artillery positions, the scouts in their green coveralls advanced in single file nearer and nearer to the war.

In the 2nd Battalion trenches Travkin met Mamochkin. He had sent him here after his three days in the guardhouse to be in permanent charge of the observation post—"closer to the enemy and farther from the chickens." With a dashing click of his heels Mamochkin handed him the observation plan and notes on enemy movements during the previous twenty-four hours.

From a machine-gun nest Travkin examined the enemy outposts through a telestereoscope. The battalion commander, Captain Mushtakov, and Captain Gurevich of the artillery usually joined him here. They knew of the approaching patrol, and he was irritated by the apologetic expression he read in their eyes, which as much as said: you've got to go over *there*, while we'll be sitting in sturdily-roofed dugouts.

Their very courtesy, their constant eagerness to be of assistance, got on his nerves. His whole being rose up in protest against their thoughts which seemed to have condemned him to death. He laughed as he squinted through the telestereoscope, thinking to himself: "You wait, my friends, I'll outlive you all!"

Not that he wished them ill. On the contrary, he had a great liking for both of them. The young, handsome Mushtakov was the best battalion commander in the division. And as for the gunner, Travkin was particularly attracted by his politeness and orderliness under all conditions, and his unusual mathematical gifts. His battery conducted fire with exceptional precision, and it struck terror into the Germans. Gurevich hung around in the trench from morning to night, watching the Germans with the persistence of hatred, and he always had invaluable information for Travkin. In Gurevich, Travkin saw his own fanatical devotion to duty. Not to think of his own advantage but only of the job on hand—this was how Travkin had been brought up, and Gurevich belonged to the same school. They talked of each other as kinsmen, and indeed they were both of the same breed—our country's breed of men who believe in their cause and are prepared to give their lives for it.

Travkin gazed intently at the German trenches and the barbed-wire entanglements before them, fixing in his mind the slightest folds in the terrain, the direction of the enemy machine-gun fire, and occasional movements in the communication trenches.

It was with a feeling approaching envy that he looked at the crows flying between our forward

positions and those of the enemy. For them there were no menacing barriers. They were the ones that could have disclosed everything taking place on the German side! He dreamed of a talking crow, of a crow-scout, and could he but have become one himself he would cheerfully have sacrificed his human form.

After watching and making notes till his head spun, Travkin left some scouts to continue observation and went to Mushtakov's dugout.

Gathered here were young platoon commanders, junior lieutenants fresh from training schools, in new uniforms and wide canvas topboots. They broke off their noisy chatter and greeted him with respectful silence. Sitting at the table Travkin felt the curious gaze of the young officers on him, and his thoughts turned to them.

The life mission of these young men was frequently so very short. They would grow up, go to school; have their hopes, their joys and their sorrows—and all this so that one foggy morning some would get their men up for an attack and then fall to the wet ground never to rise again. Sometimes the men were not even able to say a good word about them—they had known them too short a time, they had remained strangers. What kind of heart beat beneath this tunic? What thoughts were behind that smooth young brow?

Travkin, who was about their age, felt infinitely older. It was gratifying to know that he had already done something. If he fell his men would be sorry. Even the division commander would say a word about him. "And that girl," he suddenly thought, "that Katya."

And on the eve of what might be his own death he looked at the young lieutenants with condescension and a kind of pity.

To one, a lad with big blue eyes constantly fixed on him, Travkin was attracted at sight. Meeting the scout's eye, the boy said shyly:

"Take me with you. I'd join the patrol with pleasure." That was the phrase he used—"with pleasure." Travkin smiled.

"Very well. I'll ask the division chief of staff to let you come. I haven't any too many men."

On arriving at HQ he did make this request to Lieutenant Colonel Galiev, who agreed and gave orders for the necessary instructions to be telephoned to the regiment.

And so Lieutenant Meshchersky—a well-built, blue-eyed lad of twenty in wide canvas topboots—moved into the barn. He had several books in his small suitcase and in his free time he read poetry to the scouts. They would sit in the dim light of the barn listening earnestly to the melodious rhythm

of the words, marvelling at the poet's art and at Meshchersky's flush of excitement.

Katya now visited the barn when Travkin was absent. Meshchersky always greeted her politely, shook hands and invited her to sit down. The scouts liked this although it amused them a bit, unaccustomed as they had become to such politeness.

Once Meshchersky happened to mention Katya to Travkin.

"A wonderful girl, that radio operator."

"Who do you mean?"

"Katya Simakova. She often comes here."

Travkin was silent.

"Why, don't you know her?" asked Meshchersky.

"I do. But what makes you think she's so wonderful?"

"She's kind. She launders for the scouts, and they read her their letters from home, tell her all their news. Everybody's glad when she comes. And she sings beautifully."

Another time Meshchersky suddenly exclaimed with his characteristic enthusiasm:

"But she loves you! Honest, she does! Do you mean to say you haven't noticed? Anybody can see it.... That's grand! I'm awfully glad for you."

Travkin's smile was strained.

"How do you know? Has she told you, or what?"

"No, why should she?... I can see it myself. She's a wonderful girl, I tell you."

"Oh, she'd love anybody," said Travkin unkindly.

Meshchersky puckered his face in pain.

"How can you say that?" he put in with a wave of his hand. "How can you even think that? It's not true."

"Time for night training," Travkin said, cutting the subject short.

Meshchersky took his training very seriously, finding an almost childlike pleasure in it. He crawled till he was exhausted and plunged boldly into the icy water; he was ready to sit up nights listening to endless tales of the platoon's exploits.

Travkin got to like Meshchersky more and more; he would look approvingly at the blue-eyed lad, thinking, "He's the stuff scouts are made of...."

CHAPTER SIX

"SO TOMORROW night we're off. Hope it's a dark night—that's the main thing for reconnaissance," Mamochkin held forth, showing off before the young scouts.

He was in his cups. In view of the approaching patrol Travkin had released him from outpost duty to rest and Mamochkin immediately made his way to "his" old widower. He returned to the barn with a pitcher of honey, a jug of home-distilled vodka, a tin of butter, some eggs, and three kilograms of sausage. He had answered the old man's timid protests at the size of the tribute with a certain sadness:

"Never mind, old man. It's quite possible you won't ever see me again. I'll go straight to heaven, of course. When I meet your old woman there I'll tell her what a good man you are. Now don't argue, this is maybe the last time you'll have to give me anything. . . ."

Considering the unusual circumstances, Mamochkin had decided to disclose the secret of his "supply base." He took Bykov and Semyonov with him and loaded them with provisions, smiling with self-satisfaction and asking continually:

"Well, how do you like it?"

Semyonov was filled with admiration at Mamochkin's incomprehensible, almost magical good fortune:

"That's grand! How'd you manage it?"

But Bykov suspected it was a shady deal. "Careful, Mamochkin," he said, "the lieutenant'll find out."

As they passed the old man's field Mamochkin squinted at "his" horses harnessed to plough and harrow. They were being driven by the old man's son, a silent, stooping idiot, and his daughter-in-law, a tall, handsome woman.

He looked at the big sorrel with the white star and remembered that it belonged to the queer old woman where the platoon had stopped to rest.

"How that old lady must be cursing us!" flashed through his head. For a brief instant he felt something like a prick of conscience. But now all this was unimportant. Ahead was the patrol, and who could tell how it would end?

When Mamochkin entered the barn he saw Travkin sitting by the old thresher, pencil in hand,

starting a letter to his mother and sister. He suddenly paled and went quietly up to the lieutenant. A rare timidity flickered in his eyes. Travkin looked at him in surprise.

"Comrade Lieutenant," said Mamochkin, "how about a radio outfit? Will we be taking one?"

"Yes, Brazhnikov's gone for it."

"What about an operator?"

"I'll send the messages myself. Not worth while taking an operator. We might get a coward or a bungler. No, we'll manage ourselves, I know a bit about radio."

"Yes. . . ."

There was obviously nothing more for Mamochkin to say but he hung about.

"Comrade Lieutenant," he said. "Would you like some pork sausage?"

He expected the lieutenant to make short work of him—"plundering the peasants again. . . ." But he refused with curt thanks and turned back to his letter. Then Mamochkin made up his mind. His voice suddenly trembling he said:

"Comrade Lieutenant, don't write that letter."

"What's biting you?" Travkin asked in surprise.

"It was the same way, here at the thresher, Marchenko wrote a letter before he left. It's a bad

sign. Our fishermen back home believe in signs—and honest, they're right."

"Cut that stuff, Mamochkin, that's just old wives' tales," said Travkin mockingly, yet softly.

Mamochkin turned away. Travkin picked up his pencil again but at that moment his eye fell upon a dark heap of straw near the entry. At one end lay a small knapsack darkened with age, sweat and rain . . . Marchenko's bed.

Travkin did not finish his letter after all. Brazhnikov arrived carrying a small radio set, followed by Major Likhachev, the Division Signal Officer, Katya and two other radio operators. Likhachev once again explained to Travkin the use of the coded map and table.

"Look, Travkin. The code for enemy tanks is 49, infantry 21 and the map's divided into squares. Suppose you want to report tanks in this district. You say: forty-nine square Bull four. If it's infantry, then twenty-one Bull four, and so on."

They practised for the last time. The group's call signal was to be *Star*, the division's was *Earth*.

Strange words filled with secret meaning sounded in the stillness of the barn. The scouts listened with a sudden thrill as they stood silently around Likhachev and Travkin.

"Earth, Earth. Star calling. Star calling. Twenty-one Buffalo three. Twenty-one Buffalo three. Over to you."

Likhachev, also agitated, replied in a dull, hollow voice:

"Earth calling Star, Earth calling Star. Have I understood? I repeat: 'Twenty-one Buffalo three.' Over to you."

"Star calling Earth. Correct. Continuing. Forty-nine Tiger two."

The mysterious inter-planetary conversation continued in the gloom of the barn, and the listening men felt as though they really were lost in space. As for the swallows building their nests under the eaves, they flapped their wings merrily as they continued their carefree domestic chatter.

When he left, Likhachev squeezed Travkin's hand and said:

"But maybe you'd like an operator just the same? I've got good lads and they've been asking to go. Today I even had an application—" he smiled in some confusion—"from Junior Sergeant Simakova—she wants to go with you."

Travkin frowned.

"Oh, no, Comrade Major; I don't need any operator. We're not going for a stroll in the park."

At this ungracious rebuff to her heartfelt request Katya ran out of the barn. She was bitterly

hurt by Travkin's contemptuous words. "What a horrible, rude man," she thought, resentment welling up in her. "Only a fool could love a man like that. . . ."

As she passed Captain Barashkin's dugout she slackened her pace. "I'll go in, just for spite." With a sudden appreciation she recalled the captain's unremitting honied attentions, his courtesy, his vibrating tenor, his whisper of love—hackneyed enough but always welcome to a lonely heart. Even his thick notebook of poems and songs she now recalled with warmth. Everything about the man was ordinary, simple and understandable, and at this moment it seemed to her that just this was what made for happiness.

She entered the dugout. Barashkin met her with a somewhat surprised but pleased smile. The thought flashed through his mind that now Travkin was going and the sly creature had made up her mind not to let him, at least, slip through her fingers. The well-used notebook appeared with its songs from the films and sentimental love songs. But Katya was not in the mood for singing today.

Barashkin did his best to get rid of the interpreter Levin. But when the man finally left and Barashkin, smirking sweetly, put his arms round Katya, she was suddenly overcome by such repulsion that she pushed him away and ran out into

the murmuring forest. Never, never again. All this, the "usual" stuff, was alien to her now, disgusting. Tears filled her eyes.

Meanwhile Travkin was having a most unpleasant conversation.

The quiet, insignificant, slightly pock-marked investigating officer, Captain Yeskin, entered the barn. There was nothing inter-planetary in this conversation. The captain seated himself beside Travkin behind the curtain of waterproof capes and began enquiring in detail how and when the horses had been taken, on what grounds, when and under what circumstances they had been sent back, and why he had not got a receipt for them.

Travkin related, morosely but in detail, exactly how everything had happened. When asked about the receipt he paused for a moment, trying to recollect. Ah, yes, he had kept two of the horses for another day and Mamochkin had returned them. He called Mamochkin but the scout was not in the barn. Captain Yeskin said he would return later. Before leaving the barn he looked around as if by chance; he saw the white tablecloth on Mamochkin's bed while the others were covered with waterproof capes, but said nothing and left.

When Mamochkin returned Travkin called him over, but on second thought asked nothing about the horses. After all, Mamochkin was to accompany him on the patrol. He contented himself with asking where the scout had been the past two hours. Mamochkin said he had been with the sappers, and that ended the conversation.

Travkin and Meshchersky set off to visit Bugorkov. Meshchersky walked along with a preoccupied air. Suddenly he said:

"Travkin, say what you like, but I'm going to call Katya over. You didn't notice anything but I did. I feel very sorry for her. She was terribly upset when she ran out. Oh, Travkin, you shouldn't have hurt her like that."

He came to Bugorkov's dugout leading a very shy Katya. Yet she did not fail to notice Travkin's guilty look. For Katya it was a marvellous evening, filled with glowing hopes. And for Travkin it ended with a most pleasant surprise.

The gay chatter was suddenly interrupted when a panting Brazhnikov burst into the dugout. His eyes were sparkling, he had forgotten his cap, and strands of straight flaxen hair fell over his forehead.

"Comrade Lieutenant, you're wanted. Come quick and see."

Beside the barn there was an excited noise and bustle. The scouts ran to meet Travkin, shouting:

"Look who's come!"

Travkin halted. Grinning broadly, his sagacious

eyes shining, Anikanov advanced to meet him. Not daring to embrace his lieutenant, he shifted from foot to foot in embarrassment.

"Well, you see, Comrade Lieutenant, I've come."

Travkin stared at him thunderstruck. Words failed him. Suddenly he felt as though a weight had lifted from his shoulders. In that moment he realized the depths of doubt and uncertainty in which he had been struggling for the past weeks.

"But how've you come? Returned for good or just on your way to another unit?" Travkin asked when they had finally sat down by the small table.

"I was sent to another unit," Anikanov replied, "but I left the train. I'll just go and take a look at the platoon and my lieutenant, I thought. A soldier from our division who I met said you were still in the same place." He fell silent, then finished off with a smile: "And I thought, when I get there, then we'll see."

Anikanov was treated to a mug of vodka and some food, and Travkin watched with pleasure as he slowly ate—with relish but without greed—thanking the cook Zhilin for each dish with that wonderful rural courtesy. In the same unhurried manner he told that after they had finished seeding the reserve regiment's field he had put in an

application to be sent to the front, and had been assigned to a replacement company.

"So you're going into the German rear?" he asked the lieutenant in his turn. "Who's going with you?"

"Junior Lieutenant Meshchersky here, Mamochkin, Brazhnikov, Bykov, Semyonov and Golub."

"What about Marchenko, where's he?"

He saw the men's sombre faces, and he stopped short. Realizing, he carefully moved away his plate, rolled a cigarette and said:

"Well.... May he never be forgotten...."

There was a brief silence. Then Travkin glanced at Anikanov from under his brows.

"And how about you?" he asked. "Are you coming with me, or will you go to the unit you've been assigned to?"

Anikanov did not reply immediately. Although he looked at no one, he could feel the men waiting tensely for his answer.

"I'm thinking of going along with you, Comrade Lieutenant," he said. "In that case we'll have to write to my regiment—you know, that Sergeant Anikanov's not a deserter. In general, we'll have to write a proper letter."

Mamochkin, standing in the doorway, listened to the conversation with mingled admiration and envy. Only Anikanov could do things this way—

that he saw clearly. And at that moment he would have given his life to be Anikanov.

Meanwhile Anikanov was looking about him. He took in the waterproof capes on the straw, the green camouflage coveralls, the pile of hand grenades in the corner, the tommy guns hanging on nails, the daggers at the men's belts, and with the contented sigh of a philosopher, of one who knows life, he felt how good it was to be home again.

Travkin, calm and softened, unfolded the map and was about to explain the assignment and plan of action to Anikanov when a headquarters' runner suddenly appeared in the doorway to summon him to the division commander. Leaving Meshchersky to bring Anikanov up to date, Travkin went to the colonel.

The commander's cottage was rather dark. Colonel Serbichenko was ill; he was lying on his bed by the window, listening to a report from the chief of staff.

"But you're wearing bast sandals!" Travkin's unusual footwear was the first thing he noticed.

"Getting used to them, Comrade Colonel. Semyonov—he's from Ryazan—made them for the whole group. They're noiseless and they're easy on the feet."

The colonel grunted approvingly and sent a triumphant look at Lieutenant Colonel Galiev, as

much as to say: see what clever boys these scouts are!

Colonel Serbichenko had often had to send men out on risky assignments but today he felt almost regretful about Travkin. He reflected that Colonel Semyorkin had been right, but as far as Army Headquarters was concerned reconnaissance was nothing more than the usual staff work with summaries, reports, maps of the situation and decisions taken on large-scale operations. To him, however, this man in bast sandals and green camouflage coveralls, young, unshaven, looking like a handsome wood sprite, meant something.

He felt an urge to speak to him like a father or mother sending a son out on some dangerous job. "Take care of yourself," he would have liked to tell him. "A job's a job, but don't stick your neck out. Be careful, the war'll soon be over."

But he himself had once been a scout and he well knew that parting words like these could lead to no good—they would chill even a man with the strongest sense of duty. A man may forget a lot on the job but such words as: "Take care of yourself," coming from a senior officer would never be forgotten—and that would mean almost certain failure. So the colonel shook hands with Travkin and said only:

"Watch out. . . ."

CHAPTER SEVEN

WHEN he dons his camouflage coveralls and tightly fastens all the strings—at the ankles, the waist, beneath the chin and at the back of the neck—the scout renounces all worldly cares, big and small. He no longer belongs to himself, to his command, or to his memories. He fastens grenades and a dagger to his belt and thrusts a revolver inside his coveralls against his chest, and thus he renounces all human conventions, becomes an outlaw, henceforward relying on himself alone. He hands over all his documents, letters, photographs, Orders and medals to the sergeant major, and his Communist Party or Komsomol card to the Party organizer. Thus he renounces his entire past and his future, preserving it in his own heart only.

He is nameless as a bird in the forest. He may even foresake human speech, limiting himself to chirping and whistling to signal his comrades. He merges with the fields, the forests, the gullies, he

becomes the spirit of these places—a dangerous spirit, a spirit in ambush, his brain focussed on one thought—his *mission*.

Thus begins that ancient game with two players only—man and death.

Travkin made his way to the forward positions accompanied by Meshchersky and Bugorkov; his men he had sent ahead earlier. Meshchersky was thoroughly miserable. When Lieutenant Colonel Galiev learned of Anikanov's return, he had decided after brief deliberation to leave the lieutenant behind to take Travkin's place.

"You never can tell what may come up, and the scouts are left without an officer," he had said to the division commander, and the latter had agreed.

The three officers talked quietly as they walked along the forest paths. Actually all the talking was done by Bugorkov while the saddened Meshchersky listened and Travkin stared absently in front of him.

"If only the war'd end soon," Bugorkov concluded irrelevantly with a sidelong glance at Travkin's serious face.

Travkin made no reply. He was always particularly silent just before an assignment. This assumed, almost sleepy calm cost him no small effort

of will. It was as though placing himself in the hands of destiny, he were saying: everything's done that can be, and from now on let things take their course.

One of the artillery regiment batteries had taken up positions on a wide ridge overgrown with spruce saplings. The artillerymen were at work in the gun emplacements. At sight of Travkin they waved to him and called:

"Off on a job again?"

"Yes," Travkin answered curtly.

In the trench they were waiting for him. Captain Mushtakov was there, with Captain Gurevich and the commanders of two mortar companies. Anikanov and the other scouts were squatting on their heels in the trench talking quietly.

Captain Gurevich detailed their coordinated actions:

"So I'll lay a barrage on target six to distract the Germans' attention. Make sure not to get too far to the left, Travkin, or you'll come under my fire. After that the mortars and my guns will go for target four. If I see a red rocket from you I'll transfer to targets two, three, four, five and seven to cover your retreat."

"Mortars got the range?" asked Travkin.

"Yes, everything's ready," the mortar commanders answered.

"My machine guns are ready too, just in case," said Mushtakov.

They were all clearly excited.

Travkin climbed on the breastwork and listened intently to the sounds coming from the German outposts. Somewhere in the distance a gramophone was playing a foxtrot. Off to the left white flares soared up every now and then.

He jumped back into the trench, turned to his scouts and sappers, and said:

"Here are the instructions."

The men slowly rose.

"The enemy is holding this sector with his hundred and thirty-first infantry division. According to information in our possession he is regrouping his forces behind his rear defence lines. The division commander's orders are to reconnoitre the enemy rear, ascertain the nature of the regrouping and the strength of the enemy's reserves and tanks, and report to headquarters by radio."

After telling the scouts in what order they would advance and informing them that Anikanov was second in command, Travkin nodded silently to the officers in the trench, climbed over the breastworks and moved noiselessly down to the bank of the stream. One after another Brazhnikov, Mamochkin, Golub, Semyonov, Bykov and the three sappers who had been detailed to accompany the

group did likewise. Anikanov was the last to go over.

The men in the trench remained standing motionless for several minutes. Then Gurevich suddenly started swearing in most elaborate fashion, asked Mushtakov for some vodka and actually drank a whole glass, grimacing in disgust. Gurevich was known never to swear or drink. Mushtakov was surprised but made no remark.

Meanwhile Travkin had stopped in the low bushes on the bank of the stream. The scouts waited but for some reason Travkin made no move. For about three minutes they stood in silence. Suddenly a German flare seared the darkness, broke hissing into blinding fragments, shedding a milky light over the stream, and disappeared just as suddenly. This was evidently what Travkin had been awaiting. He entered the cold dark water, followed by the other men. Swiftly crossing the stream, they halted again in the shadow of the western bank, waiting for the next flare. Then Travkin sent the sappers ahead and followed them, his scouts coming on behind.

After skirting a hollow which turned out to be much larger than Travkin had imagined from his observations, the sappers stopped. Here the mined area began.

They moved slowly forward, testing the ground

with their long detectors and listening to the soundbox hanging on the chest of one of them.

Another light soared up. Instinctive fear pressed the scouts to the earth. They were lying on high, level ground, and they felt the whole world could see them in that dead, ghastly light. But the flare died out and silence reigned.

The sappers, their hands moving cautiously in the darkness, stripped several mines. A heavy burst of machine-gun tracer bullets soared over their heads and rushed into the distance. The scouts froze. A similar burst crackled drily to the left. From the Soviet positions, too, a lone Maxim chattered, its bullets, a last greeting, rustling by somewhere to the right.

Through the blackness the leading sapper discerned wire and turned to Travkin who was crawling behind him. "Carry on," whispered Travkin. The sappers began cutting the wire with their big clippers. Another flare blazed, another burst of tracer bullets flickered by and died out in the thick darkness.

In the light of the flare Travkin made out the German breastworks, some beams lying nearby, the edge of the forest beyond the second line of trenches, and three trees mutilated by shells—his usual point of orientation when observing the German lines. He had swerved a bit to the right. In

the darkness the compass needle showed a green, phosphorescent glow.

Nocturnal silence reigned about him. But Travkin knew that this silence was deceptive, that many eyes might be watching him in the darkness. He even started slightly at the touch of a sapper's hand on his shoulder. That meant a passage had been cut through the wire. The sappers would remain here to guard the opening in case Travkin and his men had to retreat. If everything remained quiet they were to crawl "home" in half an hour.

One of the sappers gave Travkin's hand a hard parting grip. Peering at him with eyes now accustomed to the darkness, he saw a big moustache and dark, deep-set, kindly eyes. "Mejidov," Travkin recognized him, "the finest sapper in the division. Bugorkov's done his best."

The scouts crawled through the opening in the wire, and froze almost on the German breastworks: explosions sounded on the left. The earth shook. A second later shells burst to the right. "That's Gurevich," thought Travkin.

On his left he heard German voices. Anikanov and Brazhnikov were already in the trench. The voices were coming closer. Travkin held his breath. Two Germans were approaching along the communication trench right beside him. One of them was eating something. Travkin could hear him chewing loudly. They turned off in another direction. Anikanov appeared over the breastwork and helped Travkin to jump down.

The next moment all seven were standing side by side in the German trench.

Travkin listened intently, then proceeded along the communication trench from which the two Germans had just emerged. The trench branched off. At a turn Travkin suddenly felt a warning touch from Anikanov who was leading. A German was walking along the breastwork. The scouts hugged the wall of the trench. The German disappeared in the darkness. So far, good. Now all they needed was to get into the forest.

Travkin climbed out of the communication trench and looked about him. He recognized the dark outline of the forester's hut, which he had seen so often through the telestereoscope. Beside that house was a German machine-gun emplacement. He could hear German voices there, engaged in heated argument. The path into the forest should lie straight ahead. To the left of the road was the rise with two pines, and left of the rise a stretch of swampy ground. That was where they were to cross.

An hour later the patrol disappeared in the forest.

Meshchersky and Bugorkov stood in the trench staring intently into the night. Every now and then Mushtakov or Gurevich would come up and ask softly:

"Any news?"

No, there had been no red rocket—the signal that the patrol had been discovered and was returning. There had been three bursts of enemy machine-gun fire, but that was evidently just ordinary firing at random. Meshchersky, Bugorkov, the two captains and the silent soldiers manning the trench stared intently at the river, at its high western bank, at the reeds and the bushes, the German wire and the German breastworks. But there was nothing unusual to be seen, absolutely nothing.

"The devils!" exclaimed Mushtakov in admiration. "Disappeared like goblins in the forest."

"Looks as though they've got through," Meshchersky sighed in relief, and suddenly realized that he was bathed in perspiration.

Regimental HQ rang up Captain Mushtakov. With some excitement the operator said:

"Six hundred on the wire."

From the nocturnal distance came the deep voice of Colonel Serbichenko familiar to the whole division:

"Well, how's things with Travkin?"

"Looks as if everything's all right, Comrade Six Hundred."

"So your sector's quiet?"

"Yes, Comrade Six Hundred."

"Bugorkov's men not back yet?"

"Not yet, Comrade Six Hundred."

After a moment's pause the division commander said:

"Well, that's fine. Go and get some sleep, Mushtakov."

"Yes, Comrade Six Hundred."

Then again after a short silence:

"So the Germans are quiet?"

"Everything's quiet."

"Flares?"

"Yes, but not very often."

"Firing?"

"Every now and then."

"But not as if. . . ."

"No, no, Comrade Six Hundred. Ordinary firing, as usual."

As he laid the receiver down Mushtakov remarked:

"The old man's worried."

CHAPTER EIGHT

IT WAS a cold, misty dawn, vibrant with the chilled twitterings of birds.

Contrary to the information which had reached the division, the forest was alive with Germans. Wherever one looked there were enormous trucks, even more enormous buses, and heavy high-sided two-horse wagons. And Germans asleep everywhere. Sentries patrolled the forest lanes in pairs, talking gutturally. The scouts' only cover was the inky darkness, but even that might fail them at any moment. Every now and then it would be stabbed by a match or a flashlight, and Travkin and his men would hug the danger-fraught ground. They had to spend an hour and a half among prickly fir needles in a pile of felled trees.

A German shuffling along barefoot with a flashlight came up close to Travkin. The beam shone almost on his face, but the sleepy German noticed

nothing. He let down his pants and squatted, grunting and puffing.

Mamochkin reached for his dagger. Travkin did not see it but he felt the swift movement and seized Mamochkin's arm.

The man rose and left. As he went his flashlight lit up a small patch of forest, and Travkin, rising, was able to select a path among the trees where there seemed to be fewer Germans.

They had to get out of that forest, and the quicker the better.

For a kilometre and a half they crawled almost over the sleeping Germans. On the way they worked out their tactics. Whenever a German patrol came near, or simply some soldiers wandering about on business of their own, the scouts hugged the ground. Twice flashlights were thrown right on them, but, as Travkin had expected, the Germans took them for their own men. And so they went on—crawling, pretending to be sleeping Germans, crawling again. Finally they made their way through the forest and reached its fringes in the misty dawn.

Here they had a nerve-racking experience. They literally stumbled onto three Germans, three Germans *who were not asleep*. They were half-sitting, half-lying in a truck, wrapped in their blankets, talking. One of them happened to glance at the nearby thicket and was thunderstruck. Silently, look-

ing neither to the right nor left, one following the other in an uncanny procession, seven strangely clad men moved along the forest path—no, not men, seven spectres in loose green garments, with faces deathly grave, of a ghastly, almost greenish pallor.

The weird appearance of these green shadows, or perhaps it was the vague outlines of their forms in the morning mist, gave the impression of something spectral, unearthly. At that moment it never even entered the man's mind to think of Russians, of the enemy.

"Grüne Gespenster," he gasped in fright. "Green ghosts!"

If Travkin or any of his men had made the slightest movement of surprise or alarm, the slightest attempt at attack or defence, the Germans would probably have raised the alarm and that misty forest outskirt would have become the arena of a brief but bloody clash with all the advantage on the side of the numerous enemy. Travkin was saved by his presence of mind. He instantly calculated that as long as only three Germans had seen him there was no sense in provoking a clash, and when he got to the nearest grove, where there might be no Germans, he would have a chance to escape even if these three raised a belated alarm. He also decided not to run. Instinct rather than reason told

him that—just as one must not run from a dog, for it immediately senses your fear and sets up a furious barking.

With even, unhurried steps the scouts passed the petrified Germans. Plunging into the grove, Travkin looked about feverishly and took to his heels. They swiftly crossed the grove, came out on a meadow and dashed into the next grove, startling the swamp birds. Here they caught their breath. Anikanov reconnoitred and ascertained that there were no Germans about. Exhausted, the men sank down on the grass and lit cigarettes. Travkin spoke for the first time since the previous evening:

"Nearly got caught."

He smiled. Speech was difficult, his tongue felt heavy and awkward after a long night of silence.

They had the pleasure of watching about ten Germans in extended order warily comb the grove which they had left. Coming out on its western edge, the Germans stared hard at the swampy meadow which the scouts had just crossed. Then they gathered in a group, talked, laughed—evidently at the three who had seen green ghosts—had a smoke, and left.

The new men—Semyonov and Golub—looked at the Germans with contemptuous surprise. This was the first time they were seeing the enemy so

close. Travkin, for his part, was closely watching the new scouts. They were behaving well, doing what the others did. Semyonov, although young as a scout, had seen plenty of active service, had been wounded twice, and had the cool head of an old soldier. Brisk little Golub, a seventeen-year-old lad from Kursk, whose father, a Soviet official, had been hanged by Hitlerites, was always in a state of excitation. His youthful heart held a strange mingling of very real hatred for the murderers of his father and the romanticism of the tales of pathfinders, Indians and bold explorers. The strangeness of the situation filled him with exaltation.

Mamochkin could not but admire Travkin's iron self-control and suddenly, for the first time in the past days, he felt confident in the success of their dangerous venture. He recalled how he had said goodbye to Katya the previous evening. She had begged him to take care of the lieutenant, and he had patted her shoulder with a complacent smile.

"Don't worry, Katyusha," he said. "With Mamochkin at his side your lieutenant's as safe as in the State Bank."

"Looks as if it's the other way round—with this lieutenant it's Mamochkin who's safe," he now admitted to himself, and looked at Travkin with eyes once more gay and somewhat impudent. He gave each of the men a piece of sausage, reserving the

largest for the lieutenant, and poured a whole mug of vodka for him out of his flask.

After making certain that there were no Germans in the grove, and setting a guard to be doubly sure, Travkin took the set from Brazhnikov's back to send his first radiogram.

It was a long time before he got an answer: the ether was filled with crackling and a faint rumble, fragments of talk and music, and on a wavelength very close to his own he caught firm, authoritative German speech. He started involuntarily—a wavelength so near, he feared, might betray Star.

Finally he heard a faint reply, a voice repeating the same word over and over:

"Star. Star. Star. Star."

Travkin and the distant operator from Earth exclaimed simultaneously in joy.

"Transmitting to you," said Travkin. "Twenty-one Owl two. Twenty-one Owl two."

Distant Earth, after a moment's silence, reported that it had understood. Understood very well.

"A great many twenty-one, a very great many," Travkin insisted. "Twenty-one only just arrived."

Earth understood that too and repeated like an echo: "A very great many twenty-one."

Spirits rose. To cross such a front line, and then a forest thick with Germans, and after that

make radio contact and send in a report about these Germans—that was living!

Again and again Travkin examined the faces of his comrades. They were no longer subordinates, but real comrades, on each one of whom depended the lives of all, and he, the commander, sensed them no longer as men apart and separate from himself, but as limbs of his own body. While on Earth he could allow them the right to live their own separate lives, have their own weaknesses—here, on this lonely Star, he and they comprised one integral whole.

Travkin was pleased with himself—himself, multiplied seven times over.

After discussing it with Anikanov he decided to start at once for the village designated in the plan, where a road crossed the railway line. True, moving by day was dangerous, but they could keep to the woods and swamps, skirting villages and roads. The Germans usually avoided such parts.

As soon as they emerged on the western edge of the grove, however, the scouts spotted a German column moving along a cart track through swampland. The uniforms were black instead of the usual dark-green, and the pince-nez of the officer heading them sparkled menacingly.

"SS men," Anikanov whispered.

The SS detachment was followed by a supply column of twenty huge carts loaded to capacity.

Diving into the neighbouring wood, the scouts found fresh caterpillar trails. They followed them cautiously to a glade where they saw twelve camouflaged armoured half-track personnel carriers. The fresh dust on the caterpillar tracks showed that the group had arrived quite recently, which could also be gathered from the behaviour of the men: They were running noisily about the forest, cutting down trees, chopping branches for firewood, and pitching tents—in a word, busy with everything that men do on arriving at a new place.

The scouts crawled away from this dangerous glade and circled it far to the right, but here they found another German camp, full of trucks loaded with ammunition.

The young grass in the forest was littered with empty cigarette packets, tins, dirty fragments of newspaper in Gothic type, and empty bottles—the traces of a hateful, alien life. Numerous markers were nailed to trees, most frequently bearing the figure "5" and the letter "*W*."

They would have to wait for darkness: it was impossible to move by day. The place was packed with Germans—talking gutturally, sleeping, walk-

ing and riding—packed with *massing German troops.*

Travkin, and the other scouts, too, saw that the Germans, concealing fresh forces in the dimness of these vast forests, were hatching something. They realized, perhaps for the first time, the full importance of their assignment, the full measure of their responsibility. After dozing away the remainder of the day in a little hollow the scouts set out again at nightfall.

Soon they came to a lovely place of lakes, large and small, cool, fringed with birches and alive with the croaking of frogs.

Travkin called a halt in a hollow thickly grown with nut trees, not far from a lake. A large two-storey stone house stood on the opposite shore. From there came sounds of German speech. A narrow country lane ran to the right of the house, and on the horizon, between telegraph poles, lay the main road.

Travkin set up a post not far from the road. Trucks and cars were passing in an almost uninterrupted stream. These were worth watching. Sometimes the traffic would cease for an hour, and then it would continue as heavy as ever. The trucks were packed with Germans and with mysterious tarpaulin-covered loads. Twice guns passed, drawn by powerful towcars—twenty-four in all.

Travkin observed this stream of traffic continually; some of the others would take turns sleeping while the rest kept count with Travkin of the passing German forces.

"Comrade Lieutenant!" Mamochkin popped up out of the darkness. "On that track there's a cart with only two Germans. And there's food in the cart. Allow us to finish them off without firing a shot."

Travkin cautiously accompanied him, and sure enough a cart was moving slowly along the track. Two Germans were smoking and chatting lazily. A pig was grunting in the cart. Yes, it was quite a temptation to do away with these Fritzes. They were simply asking for it. But Travkin shook his head, not without regret.

"Let them go."

Mamochkin was somewhat hurt. With everything going so well, he was in a fighting mood, anxious to display his initiative to the other men—and especially Anikanov. "What's the need for all this walking about and prying when there's 'tongues' to be had all around?"

With the slow advance of dawn, movement along the main road stopped.

"They're moving only at night," Anikanov noted. "Hiding from our aircraft. Cooking something up, the rats."

Travkin took his men back to the thick nut grove and the scouts dozed, shivering in the morning chill. Suddenly something like a cry or a groan came from the house by the lake.

Somehow the thought of Marchenko flashed through Travkin's mind. There was another cry, then silence.

"I'll go see what's going on there," Brazhnikov suggested.

"Better not," Travkin replied. "It's getting light."

Dawn had actually broken, and glimmers of red were reflected in the lake. After eating some rusks and sausage that Mamochkin had produced out of his bottomless pockets the scouts dozed off again.

But Travkin could not sleep. He crawled nearer to the lake and lay motionless in the bushes, almost at its very edge. The house on the other side was waking up. Men moved around in the yard.

Soon three of them emerged from the gate. The tallest man saluted and began walking slowly away from the house. On a slight rise he turned and waved to the two standing by the gate, then proceeded quickly along the country road. At that moment Travkin saw a knapsack on his back and a white bandage on his left arm.

A thought flashed through Travkin's mind that

this soldier should be captured. It was not so much a thought as that impulse of the will which rises in every scout at the sight of a Nazi. Then Travkin suddenly realized the connection between that white bandage and the cry that had startled the scouts during the night. The house by the lake was a German hospital. The tall German walking along the dirt road had been discharged and was on his way to his unit. *This was a soldier who would not be missed.*

Anikanov and Mamochkin were awake. Travkin went up to them and pointed to the tall figure passing among the scattered trees.

"We must get that Fritz," he said.

The two men were surprised. Here was the lieutenant, usually so cautious, ordering them to capture a German in broad daylight. Travkin pointed to the house.

"That's a hospital," he explained.

They saw the white bandage shining in the sunshine and understood.

They wakened the sleeping scouts and moved through the woods to cut across his path. He marched along whistling, evidently enjoying the spring morning. It was all extraordinarily simple. Little Golub, who had never before captured a "tongue," was quite disappointed. He did not even have a chance to touch the Fritz. The man was

bundled up and gagged with his cap before the excited Golub realized what was happening.

In the thick grove of nut trees in the hollow the German lay on the ground, his sharp nose pointing to the sky. The cap was removed from his mouth. He groaned. Pronouncing the German words with a hard Russian accent, Travkin asked:

"Zu welchem Truppenteil gehören Sie?"[1]

"131 Infanteriedivision, Pionier-kompanie,"[2] the German replied.

This was the infantry division which the scouts knew was holding the front line.

Travkin took a good look at the prisoner. He was a young man of about twenty-five, with flaxen hair and typical German watery blue eyes.

Looking hard at those watery eyes, Travkin asked his next question:

"Haben Sie hier SS-Leute gesehen?"[3]

"Oh, ja," replied the German, sounding as though he were glad to be so well informed, and looking at the Russians surrounding him with greater courage. "Eine ganze Menge, überall."[4]

"Was sind das für Truppenteile?"[5] asked Travkin.

1 To which unit do you belong?
2 131st infantry division, sapper company.
3 Have you seen SS men here?
4 Oh, yes, there are a lot of them everywhere here.
5 What units are they?

"Die Panzerdivision 'Wiking.' Eine sehr berühmte, starke Division, Himmlers Elite."[1]

"Ah . . ." said Travkin.

The scouts realized that the lieutenant had found out something very important. Although the prisoner did not know the strength of the Viking division or the object of its concentration here, Travkin could gauge the significance of the information he had gained. He looked almost with warmth at this lanky German and examined his papers. And the German, watching this young man, this Russian with something of sadness in his eyes, suddenly felt a gleam of hope: could this charming lad really order him to be killed?

Travkin raised his eyes from the German's army papers and remembered that the man had to be finished off. As though sensing his thought the prisoner suddenly started, then said with emotion:

"Herr Kommunist, Kamerad, ich bin Arbeiter. Schauen Sie meine Hände an. Glauben Sie mir, ich schwöre: bin kein Nazi. Bin selbst Arbeiter und Arbeitersohn."[2]

Anikanov understood more or less the sense of what the German said. He knew the word "Arbeiter."

1 The Viking tank division. A very famous, strong division, picked Himmler troops.
2 Mr. Communist, Comrade, I'm a worker. Look at my hands. Believe me, I'm not a Nazi, I'm a worker and the son of a worker.

"There he is showing his calloused hands and saying: 'I'm a worker,'" said Anikanov thoughtfully. "That means he knows we respect working people, knows whom he's fighting, but he keeps on fighting all the same...."

From his earliest years Travkin had been taught to love and respect working people, but this typesetter from Leipzig had to be killed.

The German sensed both the pity and the inflexibility in Travkin's eyes. He was not stupid. Setting type he had read many wise books and he knew what kind of men stood before him. And, seeing death in the form of this handsome youth with pitying and relentless eyes, he burst into tears.

CHAPTER NINE

WHAT was taking place inside their hearts? They themselves could hardly have said. All that was irrelevant, all that was in the past had faded from their memories, and if it ever returned now and then it was only in vague flashes. They lived for their *assignment* and they thought of nothing else.

Anikanov and Golub led the way, followed at a distance of about forty metres by Travkin and Semyonov, carrying the transmitter; on their left, almost at the edge of the highway running parallel to their course, were Mamochkin and Bykov, and on the right Brazhnikov guarded the group on the forest side. They formed an isosceles triangle with Travkin in the centre of the base and Anikanov at the apex. Sometimes, sensing the proximity of Germans, the triangle closed in and moved more slowly, and the men would halt and listen intently to the nocturnal sounds. Whenever Anikanov gave a bird call all stood frozen to the spot.

Trucks and tractors passed along the road to the left. They could hear German songs, German curses, German commands. Sometimes infantry would pass, and the soldiers' talk would be so distinct they felt that by stretching out a hand they could seize a German, touch a German face, burn themselves on a German cigarette.

Travkin had firmly determined to take no more "tongues" for the present. He felt that now he was in the very centre of the enemy units. One careless movement, a half-stifled cry—and the whole SS horde would be upon them. He knew that the Viking SS tank division was massing here but he did not know its strength or its intentions. The strength he could gauge approximately by counting the units, tanks and artillery, but the intentions of its command could be known only to a well-informed German. Such a German had to be found after they took a look at the railway station.

But Travkin's cautious plan was unexpectedly upset. He suddenly heard a noise to the left, then Mamochkin emerged from the darkness and reported in a whisper:

"There's a German lying here by the road. Drunk as a lord. . . ."

One glance at the "drunken" German told Travkin what had happened. The man had incautiously

wandered into the thicket and been stunned and disarmed by Mamochkin.

"He ran right into me," Mamochkin explained in some embarrassment. "What could I do?"

There was no time for discussion. They seized the prisoner and dived into the forest. They could already hear the shouts of the Germans—strange to Russian ears—calling for their lost comrade: "U-hu-u-u-u! U-hu-u-u-u!"

"Willibald! Willibald!"

"Herr Benneke!"

They laid the prisoner on the grass beside the lake. Mamochkin splashed water over his face and did not even grudge him a little vodka out of his flask. He beamed and fussed about "his" German, praising him to the skies:

"Now here's a real SS man, he'll know everything. . . . Look, Comrade Lieutenant, he's an officer, I swear, an officer!"

Yura Golub, examining the German with curiosity, wrinkled his little nose in disappointment and sighed despairingly:

"Everybody gets hold of 'tongues,' and I still can't find one."

"Never mind, Golub," said Anikanov, listening tensely to the shouts fading in the distance. "Plenty of that crew round about here. You'll get your chance."

The SS Hauptscharführer was looking at Travkin in horror. Trembling and stuttering, he said that he was in the Ninth Westland Motorized Regiment of the Fifth Viking SS Tank Division—that is to say, told what was in his army papers which Mamochkin had taken from his pocket. He said further that the Westland regiment consisted of three battalions, four companies each, and that the "heavy arms regiments" had six- and ten-barrelled mortars. There were no tanks in the regiment—and whether the other regiments had them he did not know. The division had come from Yugoslavia. Headquarters was in a village not far away but he did not know its name because he could not remember Russian and Polish names. He remembered only "Moscow" and "Warsaw," he said in strangely challenging tones.

A slap in the face from his "patron" Mamochkin shattered the self-control which he had managed to collect for a moment and he howled like an animal. In general he was beginning to fear Mamochkin worse than death. It was enough for the scout to stoop over him and the Nazi would tremble and look imploringly at Travkin.

After the Hauptscharführer had been thrown into the lake Travkin established contact with Earth. This time audibility was excellent, and he transmitted all the information he had gathered.

Judging by the voices coming from Earth, Travkin realized that what he had reported was unexpected and was considered very important. Finally a woman's voice spoke and he recognized Katya. She wished him good luck and a quick return.

"We send you our love," she concluded in a voice trembling with agitation and pride in his success, and then, as though what she had said had direct bearing on the job on hand, she asked: "Did you understand? How did you understand me?"

"I understand," he replied.

Dawn found the scouts beside a railway halt, seven kilometres from the station they sought. This halt consisted of a small one-storey brick building painted yellow and surrounded by a double barrier of thick pine logs. A similar protection had been set up on both sides of the small wooden railway bridge not far from the halt. By these means the Germans hoped to protect their communications from partisan raids.

A long column of trucks was drawn up before the halt, the rear machines stretching back to the forest out of which the scouts were emerging in this early hour. In the deep silence they heard a telephone ring in the building and a coarse German voice.

After wandering in the forest for two days it was pleasant to see the railway line stretching into the misty distance, the semaphore and the black angles of the points.

After bringing the scouts to a stop with his prearranged bird call, Anikanov crawled to the last truck and peered into the driver's cabin. It was empty. So were the next two. They were loaded almost to the top with empty flour sacks.

Anikanov returned and reported to Travkin.

"They've come to load," he said. "They're waiting for a train."

Travkin decided to wait for the train too, but none appeared. After a little while sleepy drivers poured out of the building and dispersed to their trucks, talking lazily.

Travkin could tell from fragments of conversation, plainly audible in the still morning air, that the trucks would be loaded not here but at the station, and that they were just about to start. After an instant's thought he decided to send two of his scouts to the station and have the rest wait for them here. The station would be alive with Germans; there was no sense in risking all his men.

He selected Anikanov and Bykov for the job, then yielded to Golub's pleading and sent him as a third.

"Hitch-hike, of course," said Anikanov in a businesslike tone.

The three men crawled up to the rear truck and quickly clambered into it. Anikanov carefully covered Bykov and Golub with sacks, and then burrowed under them himself, leaving a small opening to look through and holding his tommy gun ready.

Soon the German driver came strolling up to the truck. He took his place at the wheel, waited for the machine in front of him to move, switched on the ignition and pressed the starter. The engine hummed.

The column moved along the forest road, bouncing on the ruts. Thus they drove for about fifteen minutes. Suddenly the driver put on the brake.

Anikanov heard German speech and saw the figures of two Germans pull themselves up over the side and jump into the body of the truck. Luckily for the scouts the Germans were evidently afraid of getting flour on their black SS uniforms; they sat on the backboard, carefully avoiding the sacks. But all the same they were unpleasant neighbours. The truck bounced and swayed, and every now and then the outlines of human forms were discernible beneath the sacks. Anikanov began to feel uneasy. Their uninvited companions might be intending to accompany them right to the station, and that threatened to complicate matters considerably.

A sudden commotion interrupted his thoughts. The truck halted, there was much running to and fro, and the Germans sitting on the backboard jumped to the ground.

The next moment Anikanov heard the steady

drone of airplane engines. Instinctively he too ducked his head, but suddenly realized with a smile—ours!

And as though Soviet bombs could do no harm to their own, he said gaily to his comrades peeping out:

"Boys, those are our planes!"

There were six aircraft and they circled low over the forest, roaring menacingly.

Anikanov looked around. The Germans had all taken cover in the thickets. The agitated whistles of engines could be plainly heard. The station was quite near.

"Follow me!" Anikanov ordered, and they jumped down.

The scouts dashed between the trucks and tumbled into a ditch, clambered out and swiftly slipped into the depths of the forest. But during that one instant they were in the ditch a German lying there saw them, and after the first moment of startled silence he raised his head and shouted desperately:

"Fallschirmjäger!"[1]

Disorderly firing broke out. The scouts replied with several bursts from their tommy guns.

After crossing a wide glade Anikanov saw Golub's face turn grey. Then the lad fell to the ground, wrinkling his small nose.

[1] Paratroops.

"We could have got that German . . ." he said when Anikanov had pulled him onto his broad back.

Those were his first words after his wound, and the last in his short life. A dum-dum bullet had penetrated his chest below the heart. And although that poor heart was still beating, it was becoming weaker and weaker. Later on he recovered consciousness once more and saw bending over him the lieutenant's tense face and Mamochkin's large eyes filled with tears.

A thunderstorm broke loose over the forest. The oaks thick with young foliage hummed in the tearing gusts of wind, and a thousand trickles of water ran round the men's feet like mice.

Travkin sat motionless beside the dying Golub, awaiting Anikanov who had once again set off for the station, this time with Mamochkin. After this sorrowful incident Travkin had not wanted to split his group, but while Golub still lived he could not be left alone, and the job had to be done.

He tried to establish contact with Earth but failed. Perhaps the atmospheric charges interfered. The ether howled in the earphones, and there were dry, intermittent crackles.

Rivulets streamed underfoot; heavy drops fell on Travkin's shoulders. The torrential rain washed the last traces of dust and agitation from the lad's stiffened face and it gleamed in the darkness.

Anikanov and Mamochkin crawled up quite close to the station buildings. In the frequent flashes of lightning they made out two freight trains. The powerful hulks of tanks loomed on the platforms of one.

The engines puffed clouds of steam and scattered sparks on the rails. Men were milling around the warehouses surrounded with barbed wire, talking their sickening German. Then they heard the sentries shout as they chased a group of Ukrainian peasant women with sacks away from the railway line. The scouts could hear the women's cries and complaints:

"Eh, the dogs, won't let you go anywhere. . . ."

Anikanov was angry with himself. Why had he wanted to get into that damned truck? Maybe if he hadn't climbed into it Golub might still be alive. He, a Siberian, used to the taiga, what had he wanted to get into a truck for?. . .

The Germans were unloading the tanks. Evidently a big drive was coming. But the direction—that was the question. If they could get hold of one more German they might possibly find out the assignment of the SS division.

"Well, there they are, Germans walking about everywhere," thought Anikanov. "But which one of them knows his division's assignment? Get hold

of some small fry, and again we'll find out nothing worthwhile."

Anikanov's attention was attracted by two tall, thin. Germans in broad shining black capes. The lightning flashes showed them, now together, now separate, rapping out brusque orders, evidently in charge. These were obviously officers who had come in the car standing near the rear wall of the nearest warehouse.

Shivering under the downpour, Anikanov thought of Golub—was he still alive? Lying in the rain, poor lad. It would be fine to get a waterproof for him, like the ones those Fritzes were wearing.

"Grab an officer?" Anikanov asked Mamochkin.

"But the lieutenant? He didn't say anything about taking a 'tongue.'"

Anikanov studied his comrade's face.

"We'll grab one in a jiffy," he said gently, "and then home again at once."

Mamochkin gave a shiver. They were two against hundreds of bustling Germans. And from among these hundreds they—the two of them—were to seize an officer?. . . He began to tremble. But Anikanov, still looking at him intently, repeated:

"Yes, we can do it in a jiffy. . . ."

Mamochkin made a gesture of desperation, then took a deep breath and rose. Filled with admiration for himself, he raised his face to the lashing rain, and said quickly, feverishly:

"Let's do it, Vanya.... Let's do it! All right, Vanya, we'll manage it. Of course we will, won't we?"

They crawled toward the car, slipped under the barbed wire, and hid. The rain poured down on the polished chassis.

"I think one of those Fritzes is a general," Mamochkin whispered, screwing himself up.

"Of course he's a general," Anikanov murmured soothingly.

At least an hour had passed when the sound of footsteps was heard, and one of the officers said:

"Wir fahren sofort!"[1]

He fell, struck down by Anikanov's dagger in his heart. The other one, stunned, his face pressed to Mamochkin's wildly heaving chest, lost consciousness.

The Germans round about continued hurrying from the warehouse to the trains and back again, shivering under the streaming rain.

[1] We'll be leaving right away.

CHAPTER TEN

THE FIFTH Viking SS Tank Division was one of the supercrack divisions of the crack SS troops.

Under the command of Gruppenführer (SS Lieutenant General) Herbert Hille, this division, comprising the Ninth Westland Motorized Regiment, the Tenth Germania Motorized Regiment, the Fifth Tank Regiment, the Fifth Mobile Artillery Battalion and the Fifth Field Artillery Regiment, was concentrating secretly in this huge forest, in all the splendour of its first-class equipment. With a sudden drive it was to break the Russian ring encircling the town of Kovel, slice the Russian forces into isolated groups, decimate them, and drive them back to two famous rivers—the Stokhod and the Styr.

Having received strong reinforcements and sixty new Tiger tanks, which Herr Reichsminister Speer called the "King of Tanks," the division now

numbered fifteen thousand men. The regiments were commanded by Standartenführer Müllenkampf, who had been frequently cited by the Führer, by Standartenführer Gargeis, formerly Hitler's personal adjutant, and other of Himmler's wolves who stood high up in the National-Socialist and military hierarchy—ruthless, successful intriguers.

The 342nd Grenadier Division commanded by Lieutenant General Nickel—another crack division, though less outstanding than the Viking—was to follow on from France. This division was to exploit the success of the SS troops.

This entire operation was being carried out in the strictest secrecy.

"The Russians have driven too close to the Governor-General's Province," Gruppenführer Hille was told by his patron, von der Bach, commander of an SS corps, who received Hille in his mansion on Pfauen Insel, near Berlin. "The results of this, Parteigenosse Hille, you can understand yourself. This will mean the activization of all the anti-German forces in Europe, and may even compel the English and Americans to act. . . . The Führer attaches the greatest importance to your operation. Headquarters wants the regrouping carried out in the deepest secrecy. Take all precautions."

Now, having massed his division in the dim forests west of Kovel, Hille was awaiting further

orders, fully confident of the success of the operation entrusted to him. Of course, he knew that his division was far from what it had been in 1940, or even in 1943. It had been necessary to abandon the principle of racial purity. Bitter though it was, he had Netherlanders and Hungarians, and even Poles and Croats serving in the division. True, these foreigners were tried supporters of the New Order, but nevertheless they were men of alien blood, indifferent to the interests of the Reich. In addition to this, it had been necessary to relax the principle of perfect physique. The soldiers of the Black Corps were no longer the giants of six feet and over who had been selected from the whole of Germany. There were now such insignificant specimens that it made Gruppenführer Hille sick to look at them.

Inspecting the Germania Motorized Regiment, Hille had even seen with horror several men who had lost an eye, were lame, and even one hunchback; while more than half the regiment was undersized and puny. . . . Yes, these were not the Hitlerite Landsknechten, drunk with blood and easy plunder, who had carried fire and sword through Holland and France and had reached the Caucasus Mountains.

Herbert Hille found it pleasant to recall those days which now seemed so distant. He had liked

the Caucasus best of all—the majestic beauty of that fabulous southern region far outstripped Switzerland. At one time the Herr Gruppenführer had even dreamed of a peaceful post as Governor or Stadthalter of those fertile mountain regions and had sounded the ground for such a lucrative appointment through his patrons in the Führer's staff. But unfortunately, owing to circumstances known to the whole world, he had had to abandon these dreams.

It was strange, but he had felt a certain uneasiness from the very morning of that spring day. First of all, there had been those enemy aircraft. No, they had not dropped any bombs, but they had been on reconnaissance. The Russian planes examined the forest, followed the railway line many times, and circled for a long time over the station where the main unloading was carried on. True, the troops were well camouflaged but the very fact that the Russians were so interested in this place was disquieting.

His uneasiness became still more tangible when he heard that Hauptscharführer Benneke of Mecklenburg, a veteran and one of the best fighters in the Westland Motorized Regiment, had disappeared in the lake district during the night march. After a long search his body had been discovered in one of the smaller lakes, eight kilo-

metres from division HQ. Herr Hauptscharführer had a knife in his heart and his head had been injured by some heavy object.

It was not surprising that the Gruppenführer connected the subsequent bombing raid of Soviet aircraft on the headquarters village with the death of Benneke. He hastily transferred his headquarters to the forest and gave orders for it to be surrounded by a triple ring of barbed wire.

That evening—just as Staff Surgeon Lindemann was reporting on his autopsy of the body to the Gruppenführer, another report came in from the Westland Motorized Regiment that not very far from the place of the regrettable incident with Hauptscharführer Willibald-Ernst Benneke, soldiers combing the forest had discovered another body in a thick nut grove—the body of Corporal Karl Hille of the 131st Infantry Division. (This unpleasant coincidence of names left a bad taste in the Herr Gruppenführer's mouth.)

A little later Standartenführer Müllenkampf, commander of the Germania Motorized Regiment, telephoned personally to report that in a skirmish with mysterious unknown persons clothed in green, two privates had been wounded—Gessner and Meissner, the former, it appeared, mortally. The Standartenführer further reported the curious fact

that the soldiers unanimously claimed the mysterious figures had been sprinkled with—snow.

The Gruppenführer ordered each case to be carefully investigated, and a thorough search made for the unknown persons; for which purpose a company was to be assigned from each battalion, and the whole division reconnaissance force was to be employed.

Among the soldiers—as the Gruppenführer learned to his dissatisfaction—panicky rumours were spreading about "grüne Gespenster" and "grüne Teufel" haunting these parts.

Gruppenführer Hille had no faith in the transcendental character of these spectres. He sent for Captain Werner, the chief of reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance, and pointed out to him that there are no spectres in warfare but there is an enemy, and instructed him to take personal charge of the operations to discover the "spectres."

That night, right at the station, where a tank regiment was detraining, two hours after the Gruppenführer himself had visited it, Sturmbannführer[1] Dille (the sound of this name, so much like his own, again jarred on Herr Hille's nerves) was killed and one of the chief quartermasters of the division, Obersturmführer[2] Artur Wendel, was kid-

[1] SS Major.
[2] SS Senior Lieutenant.

napped. Poor Herr Dille was killed by a knife thrust delivered with such force that it pierced his body through. And this had happened almost within sight of a large number of officers and men busy at the station.

The Gruppenführer ordered fifteen days' cells for the sentries and the officer on guard duty, then sent for Captain Werner and gave him a thorough dressing down for insufficient zeal in seeking the malefactors.

When a munitions train crashed, more likely owing to the dilapidated condition of the track than anything else, when three soldiers of the Germania Regiment were poisoned by tainted food, when two soldiers of the same regiment deserted—all these cases were also attributed to the "green spectres," and it became difficult to distinguish truth from fantasy, idle invention from fact.

Alarmed over possible consequences, the Gruppenführer gave orders to inform the corps headquarters and Field Marshal Busch, commanding the central army group, that the Russians had sent a unit ("Einheit") of scout-saboteurs into the rear of the German troops, and that owing to the laxity of the 131st Infantry Division these scouts had penetrated into the centre of the Viking Division positions and might quite possibly have discovered something of the objectives of the regrouping.

After some thought Herr Gruppenführer also wrote a personal letter to Obergruppenführer von der Bach in Berlin in order to amuse his patron and at the same time ensure his support in case the operation failed. Quite a few generals who were cooling their heels in the Berlin reserve would have been delighted to take Herr Hille's place.

Toward the end of the next day the Gruppenführer was awakened from his after-dinner nap by the insistent ringing of the telephone.

Captain Werner reported that there had just been a clash between a platoon and the green spectres. Combing the district according to the division commander's orders, this platoon under Untersturmführer[1] Altenberg had come upon a lonely shed at the edge of a wood. Several men had entered but found no one. Thanks to the vigilance of the Untersturmführer, however, the green spectres had been discovered in the attic of the shed. Yes, they had been there. Unfortunately they had succeeded in escaping, after attacking Altenberg's platoon with hand grenades and killing the Untersturmführer and seven men. But in the first place, the alarm had been raised in all units in that district, and a real hunt had been organized for the green spectres, which it was hoped would end in their capture or destruction; secondly, one of these

[1] SS Lieutenant.

bandits had fallen into the hands of the soldiers —no, not alive, but dead, unfortunately.

After some thought Hille ordered his car, and escorted by a tank set off for the scene of the event.

At the edge of the wood, beside the smouldering remains of a shed, Captain Werner and SS men from the reconnaissance column met the Gruppenführer.

Without replying to their greeting Hille walked up silently to the dead enemy. This was a young Russian, not more than twenty-three, with straight flaxen hair and large, wide, dead eyes looking calmly at Herr Gruppenführer. Beneath the green coveralls ("Summer battledress of the Soviet reconnaissance," the Gruppenführer noted) he was wearing a faded Soviet army tunic with the stripes of a junior sergeant.

A little distance away eight SS men lay side by side, as though on review, arms crossed on their breasts. Herr Gruppenführer reflected with a frown that five of the eight were short, feeble-looking.... And these were soldiers of the SS Black Corps!

Travkin was quite unaware of having caused such a commotion among so many highly-placed personages in the German army. True, as they

moved in a triangle on their way back, the scouts occasionally came upon groups of SS men sniffing about and heard them calling to one another, but the scouts took them to be training and did not connect this with themselves.

In the afternoon of their fourth day in the German rear the scouts came upon a lonely shed. Travkin decided to give his men an hour's rest and at the same time get in touch with Earth. For extra caution and in order to have a good view of the vicinity, they climbed to the attic up the rotting ladder—which nearly broke under Anikanov.

Travkin had tuned in and exchanged signals with Earth when he heard a sudden call from Brazhnikov, posted as sentry beside a hole in the roof. Travkin joined him and saw about twenty SS men approaching the shed in extended order.

The lieutenant wakened his men who had only just fallen into a heavy sleep, but saw that it was too late to jump down and slip into the forest. The SS men were already close. Four of them entered the shed, poked about in the manure and emerged again. But they immediately returned and one of them began to climb the rotting ladder, grumbling and cursing under his breath.

Travkin, a revolver in each hand, held his breath. The numerous holes and chinks in the roof made the attic quite light. He surveyed his men

with a keener eye than ever before. They were a sight. Haggard, hollow-eyed, unshaven, they stood ready to fight to the death. The rotting ladder creaked, the German swore softly.

A fearful roar. Anikanov had tossed an anti-tank grenade through a hole in the roof at the SS men standing in a circle beside the shed. At the same time, Brazhnikov with his tommy gun split the head of the SS man as it emerged through the trapdoor and leaped down, followed by the other scouts, amid a cloud of dust and splinters.

In a flash, Travkin appreciated the genius of Anikanov's idea from a scout's point of view—hurling a grenade among the enemy standing outside and thus opening the way for retreat. The three SS men in the shed were easily dealt with—startled by the explosion, they could not make head or tail of what was going on.

A moment later the scouts raced to a thick fir grove, pursued by German shouts and bullets and belated grenades. At first Travkin did not notice that Brazhnikov was not with them, or that Anikanov and Semyonov were wounded. It was the panting Anikanov who told him about Brazhnikov as they ran; he had seen him fall as he came out of the shed.

The pursuit did not die down. It seemed as though they were being hunted from all sides.

Shots and shouts raised echoes through the whole forest. Then they heard the barking of dogs. Then the hum of motorcycles somewhere to the right. Anikanov, wounded in the back, was gasping. Semyonov began to limp more and more.

The rain-washed forest was fragrant. Saturated with moisture, the leaves and grass had finally relinquished their April freshness reminiscent of winter. This was real spring. A soft breeze that felt as though it, too, had been washed by the rain gently swayed the foliage, whispering its song of spring.

The sounds of pursuit died down and the wounded men were swiftly bandaged. Mamochkin took the last flask from his breast pocket and shook it. A trickle still remained. He handed the flask to Anikanov.

They saw that the transmitter on Bykov's back had been shattered by about a dozen bullets. It had saved his life but it could no longer be used. Bykov finished it off with his tommy-gun butt and scattered the fragments in the bushes.

They walked on slowly, swaying like drunkards.

Mamochkin, walking behind with Travkin, suddenly spoke.

"I ask you to forgive me, Comrade Lieutenant."

Striking himself repentantly on the breast, and

possibly weeping—it was difficult to tell in the darkness—he said in a low, hoarse voice:

"It's my fault, all my fault. It isn't for nothing our fishermen believe in fate. They're nearly always right. I didn't take those two horses back to the village, I hired them out for food. . . ."

Travkin said nothing.

"Forgive me, Comrade Lieutenant. If I get back safe. . . ."

"If you get back safe you'll go to a penalty company," said Travkin.

"Of course I will! I'll be happy to go! And I knew you'd say that! I knew you'd say that just the same!" cried Mamochkin in admiration. And he wrung Travkin's hand in an almost hysterical fit of incomprehensible gratitude and self-oblivious love.

The pursuit sounded almost alongside them. They hugged the ground. Two armoured cars rumbled past. Then quietness descended and the men continued on their way. Ahead loomed the massive figure of Anikanov. Thrusting the branches aside with his mighty shoulders, he slowly advanced, with a tremendous effort of will fighting the fog of semioblivion that threatened to engulf him.

It may be that only he, taught by his life experience, guessed that the silence now about them was deceptive. True, he did not know that the

whole reconnaissance column of the Viking SS Division, the advance companies of the 342nd Grenadier Division which had come up by forced march, and the rear units of the 131st Infantry Division were all hunting them. He did not know that telephones were ringing continually, that radio transmitters were constantly talking in their harsh language of codes, but he felt that the noose of pursuit was growing tighter and tighter.

They walked along, their strength ebbing, not knowing if they would get away. But this no longer mattered. The important thing was that the crack division with the dread name of Viking, massing in this forest to deal an unexpected blow at the Soviet forces, was doomed. The trucks, the tanks, the armoured personnel carriers, that SS man with the angrily sparkling pince-nez, those Germans with the live pig in their cart, all these Germans—guzzling, talking gutturally, fouling the forest, all these Hilles, Müllenkampfs, Gargeises, all these careerists, these punitive troops, these hangmen and murderers—all were marching along the forest roads straight to their doom; the avenging hand of death was already coming down on all fifteen thousand of them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE TRANSMITTER keeping in touch with Star was located in a lonely dugout. Junior Lieutenant Meshchersky spent his days and nights there. He slept hardly at all, only occasionally dropping his head onto his arms in a heavy semidoze. But even then he would imagine he heard the characteristic gurgle of the ether in his ears, and he would waken, blinking his long eyelashes, and dazedly ask the operator on duty:

"Are they speaking?"

The operators worked in three shifts. But Katya would not leave when her spell ended. She sat with Meshchersky on the narrow pallet, her fair head resting on her sunburned hands, waiting. Sometimes she would argue angrily with the man on duty, insisting that he had lost Star's wavelength, and snatch the mouthpiece from his hand; then beneath the low roof of the dugout her quiet, imploring voice would sound:

"Star. Star. Star. Star."

On a neighbouring wavelength someone was incessantly rumbling in German, and a little further away talking and singing and the strains of a violin sounded from Moscow—ever awake, mighty and invulnerable.

Several times a day the division commander would step in. Scouts hurried back and forth between the dugout and the barn. Lieutenant Bugorkov came every day, sometimes accompanied by Sergeant Major Mejidov. He would stand leaning against the wall for an hour or so silently watching the operator, and then leave.

Major Likhachev frequently took over from the operator on duty. Sometimes Captain Barashkin would come in for a few minutes and stand by the small window, drumming on it with his fingers and humming something from his famous notebook. Once the inseparable Captain Mushtakov and Captain Gurevich dropped in from the forward positions.

Quiet, inconspicuous, slightly pock-marked, with observant eyes beneath a bulging forehead, the investigating officer, Captain Yeskin, entered the dugout.

"Are you the reconnaissance commander?" he asked Meshchersky.

"I am acting commander."

The investigating officer said that he had to interrogate several persons involved in an illegal requisitioning of horses from the peasants. He briefly outlined the case, and asked if Meshchersky realized the significance of this misdemeanour which undermined the prestige of the Soviet Army in the eyes of the local population.

"So you see," he continued, not waiting for Meshchersky's reply, "I must interrogate the scouts who were present at the time this illegal act was committed, and particularly Lieutenant Travkin and Sergeant Mamochkin."

"They're not here just now," Meshchersky said with some impatience.

"None of them?"

"No."

The investigating officer thought for a moment.

"But I must speak to them," he said. "Will they be back soon?"

"I don't know," Meshchersky replied slowly.

Katya suddenly came up and said:

"You'd better go where they are now, Comrade Captain, and interrogate them."

"And where are they?" enquired Captain Yeskin.

"In the German rear."

The investigating officer sized Katya up with calm, humourless eyes.

She met his gaze with an angry, triumphant smile.

Meshchersky also smiled, but suddenly realized that if his commanding officer ordered this man to go to the German rear to complete the investigation, he would go.

On the third day Star spoke—for the second time since Travkin had crossed the front. Ignoring the code, Travkin repeated insistently:

"The Fifth Viking SS Tank Division is concentrating here. A prisoner from the Ninth Westland Motorized Regiment said that the Fifth Viking SS Tank Division is concentrating here."

Then he gave the composition of the Westland Regiment, the location of division headquarters, and emphasized that the units were unloading and moving only at night. And again he repeated, repeated time and again:

"The Fifth Viking SS Tank Division is concentrating here, concentrating secretly. . . ."

Travkin's report produced a sensation in the division. And when Colonel Serbichenko himself telephoned the G.O.C. army and Colonel Semyorkin, army headquarters, too, was excited.

Lieutenant Colonel Galiev forgot what sleep was, answering telephone calls from the corps, the army and neighbouring divisions. He stopped shivering with cold and threw off his sheepskin

cloak. He became vociferous, exacting, gay. "Galiev smells Hitlerites," the men said.

Meanwhile on a thousand maps blue pencils had marked the district where the Viking Division was concentrating. From army headquarters this urgent report went to front headquarters, and from there to the headquarters of the Supreme Command in Moscow.

Travkin's information was regarded as being of the greatest importance by Division and Corps HQ, but at Army HQ, although it was considered important, it was not at all decisive. The G.O.C. army ordered the newly-arrived reinforcements to be sent to the divisions most likely to be attacked by the SS troops. He also transferred his own reserves to the threatened sector.

Front HQ made note of the information as further evidence of the interest displayed by the Germans in Kovel Junction. Front HQ ordered the air forces to reconnoitre and bomb the areas concerned and strengthened X Army with several tank and artillery units.

The Supreme Command, to whom the Viking Tank Division and this whole forest region, for that matter, were just specks in the over-all picture, immediately realized that the move concealed something more serious: by means of a counterattack the Germans were trying to prevent the Soviet

forces from driving into Poland. Orders were issued to strengthen the left flank of the front and transfer a tank army, a cavalry corps and several artillery divisions there.

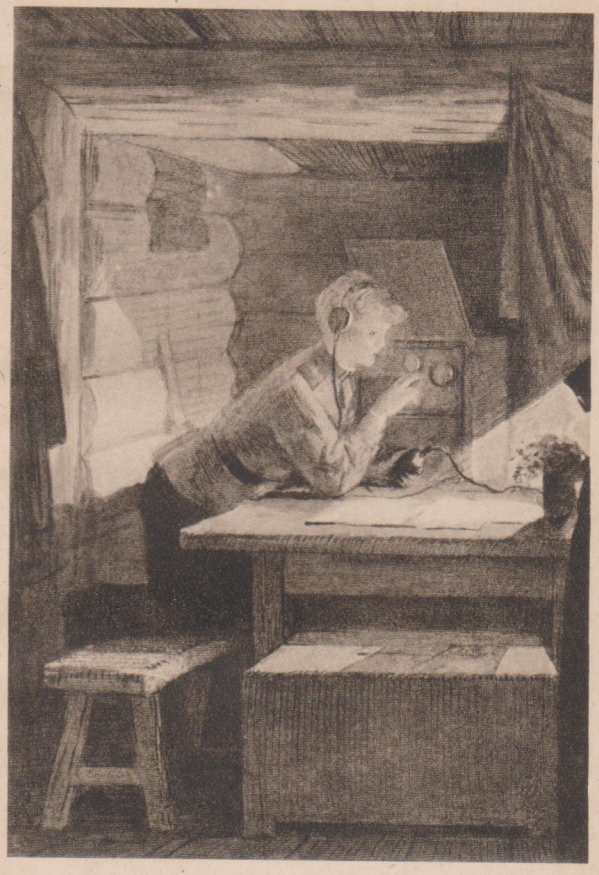
And so the circles broadened out around Travkin, extending over the earth—as far as Moscow and as far as Berlin.

The immediate results for the division were the arrival of a tank regiment, a regiment of Guards rocket mortars and big reinforcements in men and equipment. Reinforcements also came for the scouts.

Meshchersky commenced intensive training with his men and spent half his time at the forward positions observing the enemy. Bugorkov and his sappers mined no man's land. Major Likhachev was busy day in and day out, receiving new transmitters, telephones and wire. Colonel Serbichenko went to his observation post and from there guided the activities of the units. He seemed younger and grimmer, as he always was before a big battle. Long and thoroughly he studied the new maps just arrived, which took in almost the whole of Poland, right up to the Vistula. He had been in those distant parts before—with Budyonny's First Cavalry Army in 1920.

Only Katya remained in the lone dugout.

What had been the significance of Travkin's reply to her last words over the radio? Had he



said "I understand" in general, confirming what he had heard, or had there been a definite, secret meaning in his words? This thought more than any other occupied her mind. She felt that surrounded as he was by deadly danger he must have become more accessible to simple human feelings. And those last words over the radio might have been the result of such a change. She smiled at her thoughts. Borrowing a mirror from Assistant Army Doctor Ulybysheva, she gazed into it for a long time, trying to assume a gravely-solemn expression as befits—she even said those words aloud—the bride of a hero. Then, laying the mirror down, she again began repeating into the howling ether, tenderly, gaily, sadly, according to her mood:

"Star. Star. Star. Star."

Two days after that memorable conversation, Star replied again.

"Earth. Earth. Star speaking. Can you hear me? Star speaking."

"Star! Star!" Katya exclaimed loudly. "Earth speaking. I can hear you, I can hear you."

She reached out her hand and flung the door wide open to call someone in to share her joy. But there was nobody about. She clutched a pencil and prepared to write. But Star broke off in the middle of a word and said no more. All night long Katya stayed awake but Star was silent.

Star was silent also the next day and the days that followed. Occasionally Meshchersky would come into the dugout, or Bugorkov or Major Likhachev, or Captain Yarkevich—the new chief of reconnaissance, in place of Barashkin, who had been removed from his post. But Star was silent.

The whole day Katya, half-dozing, held the phones to her ears. Strange dreams and visions came to her—Travkin, very pale, in his green camouflage coveralls, Mamochkin—duplicated, with a frozen smile on his face, her brother Lyonya—also in green camouflage coveralls, for some reason. She would waken, trembling lest she miss Travkin's signal, and again start calling into the mouthpiece:

"Star. Star. Star."

The thunder of artillery came to her from the distance, the roar of commencing battle. In those tense days Major Likhachev was badly in need of radio operators but he did not have the heart to remove Katya from her vigil. And so she remained, nearly forgotten, in the lone dugout.

Late one evening Bugorkov entered. He brought a letter for Travkin from his mother, which had just arrived. The mother wrote that she had found his red notebook for physics, his favourite subject. She would take good care of it. When he entered college he would find it very useful. It really was a fine notebook, it could have been published

as a textbook, the sections on electricity and heat were so accurately and sensibly made out. He had a bent for science, and she was very glad of it. By the way, did he remember that clever watermill which he had made when he was twelve? She had come across the plans and had a good laugh with Aunt Klava over them.

Bugorkov read the letter aloud. Then he suddenly hunched over the radio and said in a choked voice:

"If only the war ended soon.... No, I'm not tired. I'm not saying I'm tired. But it's high time people stopped being killed."

Suddenly Katya realized with horror that perhaps her vigil here was useless, and her endless calls for Star. The Star had set, it was extinguished.

But how could she leave? Suppose he spoke again? What if he were hiding somewhere in the heart of the forest?

Filled with hope and an iron persistence, she waited. Now nobody else waited, but she did. And nobody ventured to remove the apparatus until the advance began.

CONCLUSION

IN THE summer of 1944 Soviet troops were sweeping across Polish territory, crushing the resistance of the waning German army.

Major General Serbichenko in his jeep overtook a group of scouts. One behind the other they strode along the roadside in their green camouflage coveralls, agile, alert, ready at any moment to disappear, to merge with the silent fields and forests, with the folds in the terrain, with the flickering shadows of dusk.

In the scout at the head of the group the general recognized Lieutenant Meshchersky. He stopped his car, his face brightening as usual at the sight of scouts.

"Well, how about it, my lions?" he said. "Warsaw's on the horizon. And there's only five hundred kilometres left to Berlin! A fleabite. We'll soon be there."

He scrutinized the scouts. Then, caught by some sad memory, he started to add something but checked himself and waved his hand.

"Good luck, scouts!"

The car started, and the scouts, after waiting for a moment, resumed their march.